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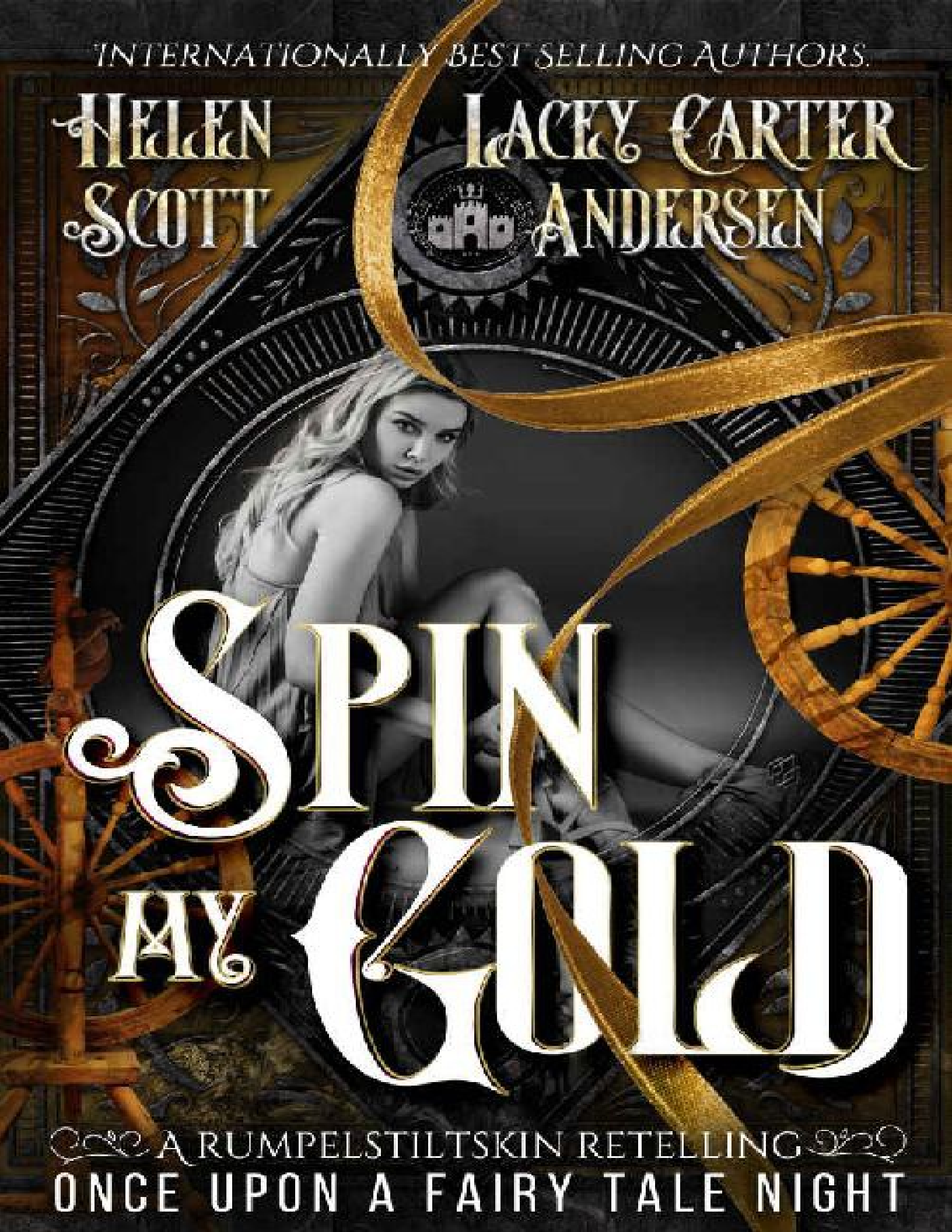

SPIN MY GOLD

A RUMPELSTILTSKIN RETELLING

ONCE UPON A FAIRY TALE NIGHT

SPIN MY GOLD

LACEY CARTER ANDERSEN

HELEN SCOTT

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1

Alexis

Blood runs down my arm, dripping with an eerie *plop plop* as I stumble along, using the wall of the alley for support. On my belt rests my gun and dagger, but I keep them sheathed. This bastard fought *me*. He hurt *me*.

There would be no more Ms. Nice Server.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" I call into the darkness, my boots soundless on the ground.

Overhead, thunder crackles and lightning splits the sky. I taste rain in the air, but it hasn't yet fallen. Instead, the air hums with the sense of change, and I pray it's only a change in the weather. Life has taught me that change often brings trouble, and I don't need any more trouble. Not when I was currently in the birthplace of trouble itself.

I stop when I'm nearly to the end of the alley. My gaze runs from the dumpsters to the loose and forgotten trash and boxes and finally to a couch thrown on its side. Along the ground, a rat skitters and disappears into the shadows once more.

"I know you're here. Why don't we stop playing this game?" I taunt.

"Why don't you go to hell, Server!" he snarls.

My lips curl into a smile as I head for the second dumpster, knowing he's just on the other side. Ogres aren't known for being smart. I know if I taunt him enough, he'll give away his position. And with a guy as big as he is, I need the element of surprise.

Or as close as it could come when he knew I was drawing ever closer.

When I'm just a couple feet from his hiding position, I step down on something hard and crispy. It makes a sound that shatters the strange silence, and I sense more than see the ogre move, knowing our little game has come to an end.

From out of the shadows, the massive creature unfolds itself to its full height, nearly eight feet tall and easily as wide as the dumpster itself. He glares down, his big lips curling with anger as he sneers down at me. And truly, he might've been a frightening sight… if not for the terrible pizza delivery uniform that strained across his body. The tiny pair of red shorts and the striped red shirt are no doubt the largest size available, but they look ridiculous on the powerful creature.

"Come on, man. Can we be done with this?" I ask, and I don't have to feign the annoyance that laces my words.

His eyes flash a glowing red. "It'll be a cold day in hell when I take that paper."

I smile and reach out, my entire hand and arm now coated in my own blood. He looks surprised

when my fingers brush his wrist, and I know he must be thinking that I look like a human, with my earth-toned skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes, and smell like a human. So what could be so dangerous about me?

Then I see the moment he feels my powers. His eyes widen and he stiffens, but it's too late. The arm I touch is already turning gold and hard. He can no longer move. He can no longer escape, and the golden curse spreads past his arm and onto his shoulder.

"What the hell?" he gasps.

"You better decide whether you'd rather be a statue or take the paper… fast… or else the choice will be taken from you."

I see the moment the truth hits him.

"Death or the paper, buddy?"

He shudders as the gold climbs down his chest. "Give me the paper."

I reach with my free hand and draw the paper from where I'd stuffed it at my back. I shove it into his working hand, and his fingers slowly close around it. "Craig Ray, you've been served divorce papers by your wife. If you do not appear in court on the appointed day, your heart will be ripped from your chest."

"Bitch server," he murmurs.

I release his hand. "The gold will fade over the next few hours."

Turning, I walk away from him. His voice stops me. "One day karma is going to get you."

I smirk. *Karma couldn't possibly kick my ass more than she already had.* "Enjoy the single life!"

On the main road, people cast me and my arm strange looks, but I know most of them won't intervene. Once upon a time I might have looked like a young princess. My hair, long and golden. My dresses, pastel shades and finely cut. But since running away from home, my parents would hardly recognize me. Not just the piercings that race along my earlobes, my collections of black t-shirts, and comfortable leather jackets and pants, but the vibe I radiated. The one which I know sends every person with even an ounce of logic running the opposite direction.

When I reach my beater of a car, I open the door with a groan that tears through the night. Climbing into the seat, I whisper several prayers that the old man will turn on, and hoot in relief when the engine starts. Then, in my seat, I pull up my phone and open my server app. The ogre's name has turned to gold, and my fee for delivery has been deposited into my account.

Feeling lucky, I decide that rather than bind my wound, I can afford a little something special. Lifting my black tank top, I stare down at the expensive rune tattooed onto my belly. Whispering the words to the spell, I watch as the tattoo brightens. Within seconds, a tingle spreads over my stomach then over the rest of my body. I know without looking that the slashes along my arm from the ogre's nails have healed.

The glow fades and the tattoo is gone.

I breathe a sigh of relief. Minor healing tattoos aren't as expensive as some of the other tattoos I carry, but I still probably should've stitched up my arm the old-fashion way. But then, I wouldn't be able to head out to my favorite Chinese food restaurant.

Grinning, I smooth my shirt back into place, use some baby wipes to clean off as much of the blood as possible, and shift my car into drive. Hard rock comes pounding over the stereo, and I unroll my windows to let the fresh air in. Trouble might have brought me back to my hometown, but having a successful person served this quickly since coming back is a good sign. Maybe the ghosts from my past will stay there long enough for me to do what I have to do and get out.

If I'm lucky.

Not that a girl whose own mother sold her is exactly *lucky*.

I don't mean to take that familiar road, but when I come to a red light, I realize that I have. Far up above, on a hill that overlooks the city, is a massive castle. Despite all the flowers and lights that try to give it a peaceful ambience, nothing can take away the knot of dread that tightens in my belly at the sight of it.

When the light turns green, I finally release a breath and turn away from it. The castle and the people in it didn't bring me here. There's no reason to think about my childhood pains. Tonight's about Chinese food and getting to lay my head down on a hotel bed that doesn't smell.

Before I have to do the impossible tomorrow.

And then I'll run out of town the same way I did when I was eighteen. Because even though I've heard news that the man who owns me is dead, I know better than to think that means anything.

As long as any of Rumple Stiltskin's blood lives, the debt can always be collected. And I happen to know for a fact that he has three sons. Three handsome sons who I've never forgotten about, and the three men who own me now.

I pull up in front of my favorite restaurant and kill the engine. Then I sit in the dark for a long moment, trying to shake off the lingering feeling that I should've never come back to this place. But when the sky opens up and the rain pours down, the feeling remains.

I might have changed. But somehow the monsters that hunted me as a child are still living and breathing in this place. I only wonder if I'll have the strength to escape them again.

2

Hyde

THE RAIN LETS up a little so I dart out from my car and head to the restaurant, my jacket offering shelter from the remaining rain that falls. A glint of gold draws my eye. Seeing Alexis in the take-out place that I frequent freaks me the fuck out. I had just reached the door, my fingertips wrapping around the silver handle, when that head of golden hair caught my eyes. No one else has hair like that. In all my travels I'd never seen it again, until now.

I swerve at the last minute and don't go into the store. Instead, I cross the street and hide myself away in the shadows. My gaze eats her up as she chats with the owner like this is her favorite take out place too, even though we know she hasn't been in the city for a while. I mean, their pork soup dumplings were the best I'd ever had, but I hadn't thought that was what would help us find our missing prize.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out, swiping on the screen to see the notification.

Z: Can you get me some spring egg rolls, too?

Me: What am I, your fucking delivery service? I hit send, then pause for a moment, debating telling them that I've found her.

C: Oh, I want fried rice!

Me: Fuck you both. If you wanted dinner you should have asked before I left. Also, I found our blonde prize.

My phone immediately starts to buzz in my hand. I groan as my brother's smug face fills my phone screen.

"What is it with you and texting? Do you have something against it ethically or what?" I grouch at Crax.

"I can't rely on you to pay attention to what I text you, so voice is better. Do not engage. You'll just tip our hand and you know it'll take more than one of us to grab her. Just because you think you're hot shit, that doesn't mean you actually are, so do us a favor and stick to the shadows until she's gone. And I want to change from fried rice to beef lo mein," Crax rants at me, only sounding reasonable when he's talking about his food.

"Why do you think I told you in the first place, asshole? I knew I wouldn't be able to grab her myself. I'm going to put a tracker on her car, then we will always have an idea where she is. I'm not

asking your permission either. I'm telling you what I'm doing, and I don't care whether you're okay with it or not," I hiss at the man on the other end of the conversation.

"Just get the food and get back, that's it," Crax says, his voice taking on that controlling tone that grates on me.

"Sir, yes, sir," I snark before hanging up on him. I was still going to do the damn tracking spell, screw Crax. My eyes flick up to find the cashier handing Alexis a giant bag of food. There is no way that is all for her. She is tiny, almost like a pixie or elf; her body doesn't have room for that amount of food.

I glance up and down the street and take a guess at which car is hers before heading in that direction. Not going to lie, I'm pretty confident in my guess. She might have that sweet and feminine look to her from the back with that glorious, long mane of blonde hair, which looks like it's made from spun gold, a taunt in and of itself, but the rest of her gives off a distinctly *do not approach* vibe, possibly even going so far as a *fuck you* vibe. Her black leather pants and jacket match the black t-shirt with some band logo on it that is underneath . The piercings are new, glittering in the dim light of the dark street. Part of me wonders why someone trying to hide in plain sight would get something so distinctive.

Alexis's whole look is one of ass-kicking efficiency. I know because it is eerily similar to my own. Crax and Zard have a hard-on for this girl, but I don't understand why, and I probably never will. She escaped us once before, and I'm determined not to let it happen again, not when we are getting so close to being done.

Just as I suspect, she heads to the beat-up POS that I'd parked behind when I arrived. It feels like more than coincidence is at play now. Seeing her in the restaurant I could write off, but parking behind her as well? Coincidences are never really coincidences. Flukes happen, but coincidences? I don't trust them as far as I can throw them.

I pull on the magic that runs in my blood and fish a marker from my pocket. Without waiting to see what she plans on doing, I swiftly move from the shadows of the alley to the rear end of her car, my marker already writing before I even settle into a crouch. The spell is short and sweet, just enough for me to find the car again. It may not take me directly to the girl, but I'm fairly certain if we find the car we will find her too. With a whisper, it fades into the metal. It will look like nothing more than a smudge of dirt to most people.

The click-click of a temperamental engine gives me just enough time to finish what I'm doing and retreat to the shadows before it turns over and the car starts, expelling a cloud of smoke behind it as it does so. As I hear her start to pull away, I step from the shadows of the building, moving forward until I can watch her go.

I get the sensation that she sees me a moment before the engine revs and the car speeds away. May not have been my best decision, and it will definitely piss Crax off if he ever finds out, but it's done now.

The girl will be ours soon enough and the debt will be settled. For now, the growl of my stomach reminds me it's food time. I grab the handle of the door and go in, placing my order and paying without really paying attention to the cashier or what they ask me. The minutes tick by as I wait for our food, but all my mind wants to focus on is the girl.

I'm sitting in the red plastic chair, waiting, when I notice the ruby-colored droplet on the ground. Had she been injured? She wasn't holding herself that way when I was watching. So maybe it was someone else's. She could have healed herself, but she didn't look like she had enough money for those kinds of spells. Maybe a tattoo? My mind spun with possibilities.

She'd certainly changed from when she was eighteen. Rumple had sent all three of us to pick her up, so proud of his new investment. The memory was a bitter taste in my mouth and left me feeling pissed off, even though I know I should be over it after the last few years. We had been tasked with capturing the girl who had hidden herself away in the house.

Crax had been so sure of what to do, and I hadn't doubted him at that point. He let me get turned into gold, though. Fortunately, it didn't kill me. Something about the magic coming from Rumple let the effects take hold without causing the pain, and ultimately, death, that they should have. Crax didn't know that though. He'd left me to die as a statue of gold, all for the sake of pleasing our father, only to leave a year later so he could go to law school.

"Hyde, your order's ready," a male voice calls from behind the counter.

The interruption couldn't have come at a better time. If I kept thinking about our past, I would be even more of an asshole than usual by the time I got home.

"Thanks, man," I say as I grab the plastic bag, the brown paper crinkling against the sides as I lift it down from the counter. He hands me another bag and all of a sudden that ruby red droplet is something I can't leave behind. I set down the bags and pull out one of the napkins that had been shoved in the top. I swipe the white material over the floor, picking up the blood, before folding the napkin and shoving it in my back pocket.

I pick up the bags of food, nod at the man who'd just watched that whole thing, and head out. Apparently I'm the only responsible one that thinks of food out of all of us, so I know I need to get home as soon as I can, otherwise Zard will get all whiny, and that was something I couldn't abide. My foot presses on the gas as I speed away, and I can't help but wonder what ran through Alexis's mind when she saw me standing behind her.

The smell of the Chinese food makes my stomach growl and I try my best to push the thoughts of the golden-haired girl from my head. We were going to catch her soon enough, and then she'd be ours to do with as we pleased. And I, for one, was going to make her pay.

3

Alexis

My heart races as I park my car behind the crumbling building and look back, waiting for any hint that Hyde might be following me. But when I don't see him, I don't feel any calmer. There are a number of people I'm supposed to avoid in this town, but no one more so than the Stiltskin brothers.

The men who owned me.

I grab my takeout bag, close and lock my door, and head for my old hangout. The door is concealed behind a dumpster. The space between the wall and the forgotten dumpster is smaller than I remember, but luckily for me, I haven't gotten much bigger. I manage to maneuver in, then cautiously shove back the door and enter, drawing my dagger out from my belt.

The room is cloaked in shadows. It could be just as I remember it, or it could have been ruined by some stray person who discovered its secrets. I move slowly along and hold in a curse when I stub my foot, then adjust my course until I think I've reached the right place. Lowering my dagger, I find the little table, and it takes me a second to fumble a match free and to strike it to life. But in the glow from the match, I discover the familiar half-spent candle and light it, then move around the room and light three more before the match burns out.

Looking around the room, I see it's exactly the way I left it. The same mountain of pillows that served as my bed, the same knicknacks. This was a little place I'd sneak away to in my teen years, when I needed a break from my family. When I wanted to just feel… safe.

I'm glad it's held up. More or less.

Sitting down on the pillows, I ignore the slight rise of dust that comes from them, resheath my dagger, and tear open the bag of food. The sweet and sour chicken is everything I remember and more, the fried rice tastes like heaven, and I generously pour the extra sauce I'd ordered over everything. When the rice is gone, and the chicken too, I open the crab puffs and egg rolls and tear into them, before finishing with the lettuce wrapped chicken.

Everything is eaten too quickly, and I sigh as I lean back, patting my stomach. Serving an ogre meant that I could afford this feast, but I didn't want to think about tomorrow. Because tomorrow, reality would come crashing back and the luxury of this kind of food would be gone.

As that sobering thought enters my mind, my phone begins to ring. I pull it out of my pocket and feel my spine stiffen. Clicking the answer button, I hold my breath.

"Alexis?"

"I'm here," I say. The sound of the familiar voice makes my chest ache.

The last time I saw Parsilla, she was just a pre-teen. Like me, her parents expected perfection. Dresses, gloves, and neatly-styled hair. She had a smile that never reached her eyes, something I could relate to. And yet, she'd been younger than me. Just a child, really. We'd only crossed paths because of her parents, and because I was best friends with her brother.

"Are you going to make it to the funeral tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I promised I would."

I know she's holding back tears on the other line when her voice comes out too high. "Thank you. He… he loved you so much."

I loved Smith too. He'd made our boring life interesting. He always knew how to make me laugh, and despite how badly all our parents wanted to force him to fit the mold, he never did.

"But Alexis, you know you'll have to be careful..."

"Story of my life," I say with a smile.

"Sterling City was dangerous when we were kids, but that's nothing compared to the way it is now. I know we used to laugh as kids about this city being cursed, but it stopped being funny a long time ago."

"Yeah." Sterling City was a city of danger and violence around every corner. Cursed or not, I wanted to get in and out of this place as fast as I could.

"There's more. You know the Stiltskin brothers are in town?"

I stiffen, thinking of Hyde. "Yeah, I'd heard that somewhere."

"Rumor is they want out of the family business. And the only way for them to get out is to collect on all their father's debts."

She didn't need to say that one of those debts was me. "Thanks for the heads up."

"Always."

Turning off my phone, I curl up on the pillows. Smith was so damn young. He was the son of my father's best friend, and had become my best friend too. When his sister had tracked me down a week ago, I'd known it was important. And even though it was a huge risk coming here, I could never have stayed away.

I had to be at his funeral, no matter how illogical it was.

When I feel the back of my eyes prickle, I squeeze them closed and tell myself to think about anything other than Smith. Anything other than the fact that his smile always reached his eyes. Other than the fact that he never cared enough to lie about anything.

And then I think of Hyde.

The ache in my chest fades, and I open my eyes, staring at the flickering candle. Hyde was one of the three Stiltskin brothers. Their father was the notorious Rumplestiltskin himself. I had no clue what their mother was, but they must have taken after her. All three were huge men, probably even bigger than they had been the last time I'd seen them. Blond, gorgeous hunks of men who I'd managed to piss off.

But then, I never said I'd go easily.

I smile. Technically, we're enemies. But I have to say, out of all my enemies, I've always enjoyed our rivalry the best. If my mother hadn't sold me to their father, I had a feeling Hyde, Crax, and Zard would be among my friends.

At least Crax and Zard.

I hate when I realize that I'm smiling still, and I force myself to stop. Crax was that guy you saw

on the street in a suit and an air of importance, but beneath that cocky air was a man I'd love to get my hands on. And Zard? Zard was just plain fun. Even when he was trying to catch me, he was cracking jokes.

Those two I might not mind meeting again… and escaping from again.

Hyde? Well, that asshole could go to hell.

Sighing, I try to push all thoughts of them out of my head. It's been a long day and tomorrow I'll have to face my best friend's funeral before running right back out of town. The last thing I need to be thinking about are the Stiltskin brothers. They're bad news. And if there's one thing I didn't need more of in my life, it is trouble.

4

Alexis

I rummage through the small bag I've brought with me. I might not have a lot, but I have enough to wear black to a funeral. I pull the black sweater over my head and shimmy into my black skinny jeans before tugging on my black boots. It doesn't look dressy or sophisticated, but it is the best I can do.

My stomach is still full from all the food the night before, which is good, because after that splurge I can't really afford breakfast. I usually skip it anyway so it isn't a big deal, but I do need to find some coffee. Stat.

As I squirm out behind the dumpster I pray that no one is around. The last thing I need is to give away my secret hiding spot. I can't exactly see around the large metal box though, so I wait and listen. When I am sure I don't hear anyone on the other side, I emerge like some kind of gremlin from the shadows.

I have just enough time before Smith's funeral to grab a coffee, so I hop in my car and head to the little local place a few blocks away. The first thing I notice when I arrive is that the atmosphere has changed. Gentrified is the word for it. Suddenly my best clothes look ragged and worn, and if the sneers that I am greeted with when I enter are anything to go by, then it has been a while since anyone like me has been in the place.

"Tall Americano," I say when it is my turn at the counter.

"That'll be five dollars and eighty cents," the cashier replies, clearly bored with her job.

My stomach drops. Five dollars for an Americano? A fancy frou-frou drink I could understand, but this is literally just a shot of espresso and some water. Ugh. "You know what, never mind," I say, before scurrying out of there like my ass is on fire. There's nothing that makes me more embarrassed than the fact that I am broke, especially when I know my mother is living in the lap of luxury. After all, that is what selling her first born has given her.

I turn my mind away from the bitter thoughts and focus on getting to the cemetery. Yes, I'll be early, but if I'm getting coffee then I don't know what else to do. On the bright side, this would give me a chance to scope the area out, find the most secluded spot to watch from. Only a couple more hours and then I can high tail it out of this city faster than I had that coffee shop.

The long, winding road of Lakeview Burial Grounds makes me uncomfortable. It isn't just the fact that the name Lakeview is misleading, since there isn't a lake within twenty miles of the place, but more that it is so open. There are barely any trees anywhere, which means no good hiding places for me.

My car chugs along the main path as I look for the spot where Smith is going to be buried. The thought makes my stomach turn. My best friend is dead. I was never going to see him again after this. My chest tightens with all the emotions I have shoved down inside myself for the last few days. If I break now though I know I won't be able to get myself back under control. I can break when I am safely out of Sterling City.

My eyes are drawn to the mound of dirt that sits next to an open grave like it is a beacon calling me home. There isn't a tree in sight. Not even a shrub. It is like the whole place was designed to be as exposed as possible. There aren't even any of those fancy family burial plots where it looks like a mini house. Although once I think about it, I realize that it is just business. They are trying to cram as many bodies in the small space as possible. It's not that Lakeview isn't a nice cemetery: it is, much better than some I'd seen before, but it is tiny, squished into a plot just outside of the downtown area, right where it becomes apparent that people have money.

I let my car roll past the grave site and through the rest of the cemetery. If Hyde had seen me in it last night, then parking on the side of the path in my POS car will be like waving a flag and announcing my presence with a megaphone. No, I have to be smart about this, since this is the one place I am sure they will expect me to be.

After I park a few blocks down in an alley, I hoof it back to the cemetery. I'm thankful in that moment that I'd never been interested in heels. Although my mother had forced me to wear them on occasion. I can only imagine what making this walk would be like while balancing four inches higher than nature intended. Blisters, aching feet, and bruises from falling, oh, my.

I move between the bars of the fence, idly wondering what the point of having one is if the gaps are big enough to let someone squeeze through. The lone tree that sits somewhat in the middle of the grounds is my goal. If I can make it there, then I can at least feel somewhat hidden. My heart is pounding in my chest as I walk, as calmly as I can, through the gravestones. I can only imagine what someone would think if they saw a girl running through a graveyard trying to get to a tree.

When I get to the tree, my hands grip the bark as though something is going to tear me away. The constricting feeling in my chest is getting worse and I'm not sure how I am going to make it through the actual funeral without losing it, especially when I see Parsilla crying. I know Smith's parents wouldn't dare express emotion in public, but Parsilla won't be able to stop herself; she is still too young to have that side of her completely crushed just yet.

A hand lands on my wrist and I look up to find myself staring into the goldish-hazel eyes of Zard. I'd let myself get sucked so far into my thoughts and memories that I hadn't even heard them approach, and yes, I knew it was them, even though I couldn't seem to drag my eyes away from Zard's stare.

"Come on, Goldie. Time to go." Crax's voice sounds from behind me. The use of the nickname they'd given me makes me want to snarl and snap at them. Remind them I am more than just my freakish ability.

Finally I am able to break the prison of Zard's hypnotic eyes and turn to look at his brother. Crax's eyes are liquid gold and warm enough that I want to fall into them. Instead I sneer. I pull up the same mask I use when I am serving papers. "I'm here for my best friend's funeral, asshole. If you take me now, I will *never* stop trying to escape. I'll make the biggest scene possible, whenever possible. Don't take this away from me." The mask slips at the end and some of the hurt I am feeling inside leaks through.

Pain reflects back at me in Crax's gaze, which surprises me.

I press my advantage. "Please, let me say goodbye to Smith. Don't ruin this for me."

He is going to relent, I can see it. I can also see the cars starting to arrive for the funeral.

"If we let her go off to the funeral, who's to say that she'll come back?" Hyde's gravelly voice surprises me as it comes from off to the left. I hadn't thought he'd be with them for some reason. Hyde always seems like the fly in the soup to me, like he doesn't quite fit with his brothers.

"I'll leave my car keys with you, my shoes, whatever you want, just don't take me away now," I beg.

The three of them are silent for a long moment. I look between them and they seem to be having some kind of silent conversation. Something which is confirmed when Hyde snorts and turns away as though he can't even look at them any more.

"I'll accompany you to the funeral," Crax says. "Then afterward we will take you home. You *will not* cause a scene when we leave. Understood?"

I nod.

"If you cause a scene, things will be worse for you later." Crax's golden eyes stare me down until I nod again.

"And you're giving me your keys," Zard says from behind me.

Immediately I tug them from my pocket and hand them over. I don't care anymore. All that matters now is getting through the next hour or so.

"Shall we?" Crax asks as he offers me his arm.

I nod again, like I'm some kind of bobble head doll and that's all I can do. The two of us set off across the grass, and my stomach twists as I see Smith's family. Parsilla is watching me like a hawk, her doe eyes even bigger than normal and shimmering in the mid-morning light. If she starts crying I'm doomed.

5

Crax

I stand with my spine straight as we go through the motions of a funeral. An unfamiliar feeling moves beneath my flesh as I try my best to be unaffected by the crying people and by Alexis, who stands beside me, but the truth is the pain of loss is something I understand too well.

It's why I became a lawyer. I couldn't stand the idea of people losing everything they have just because they didn't have the money to fight for themselves. Hyde thought that this made me weak.

Maybe it did.

But I'm not a lawyer right now, I remind myself, *and I'll never get to be a lawyer again, not unless I can collect my father's debts*. I almost sigh, but conceal my frustration at the last possible second. The last few months have been wearing on me in a way I never expected. It wasn't that I was new to my father's work. He'd drug us along with him all our lives and naturally expected that I'd take over the family business as his first-born.

It was more that… I didn't want this life. I missed my old apartment. My office where I ran my own private practice. Everything. Even if my life was like a puzzle with too many missing pieces, at least there I felt useful. At least there I didn't feel riddled with guilt and misery.

At least not the way I do here.

And I'll do whatever I have to in order to get back to that life.

My gaze slides to Alexis, and my stomach turns. Retrieving her when she was eighteen was the first mission my father trusted me enough to run without him. My brothers and I had tracked her down to a hotel just a day's travel from here. On that mission I'd learned two things: I would never take over my father's business, and that if I let myself, I might fall in love with Alexis.

But luckily for us, she escaped.

Or we let her go. I was never sure.

Time has been kind to Alexis. When we'd first met her, she'd had a delicate quality that hid the tough woman underneath. But now, she wore that toughness like a "do not touch me" badge. And to say it intrigued me and turned me on was an understatement. I always remembered her in pastel colors and pink shimmering makeup. Now, her face was bare of makeup, her long blonde hair was tied back, like a warrior, and her black outfit hugged her well-defined body.

Had she changed in other ways too? I had to imagine running from my fierce father hadn't been easy. He may have been short, but he was the stuff of nightmares for a reason.

The funeral speeches end, and the people seated in the chairs rise and move to the front to shake the hand of Parsilla Whithouse and her parents. The handshakes and hugs that are exchanged between

the two primply dressed parents is formal. But the way people embrace Parsilla… it speaks volumes. It's as if only the daughter is in mourning, and the parents are simply there for a public event.

When it's our turn, Mr. Whithouse's eyes widen as they fall on Alexis. "Al-Alexis Chadwick? Is that you?"

"Yes. I'm so sorry for your loss," she says, reaching out a hand.

He shakes it lightly. "Have you seen your parents yet? It's been awhile since you've been back to town."

She gives a forced smile. "No, I haven't had a chance to see them. This is a short trip."

His gaze moves behind her and connects with mine. I see his jaw drop. No doubt he's shocked that Alexis came to such a public event with a half-gnome. Or perhaps he's just surprised that I didn't try to hide my pointed ears. Or maybe, like most people, he's shocked to see a gnome of my massive size. No doubt the word "mutt" is circling through his mind.

Then his gaze returns to Alexis. "Before you go, we really should talk."

"Yes--"

"It's important."

She slowly nods. "Okay."

Moving to Mrs. Whithouse, I'm suddenly in front of the man.

He puts his hand out like touching me is the last thing he'd ever want to do, and I reluctantly shake his hand. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"You're Rumple's boy, aren't you?"

I lift a brow, surprised. Did I know him from somewhere? "Yes, I am."

Suddenly, he pulls me in closer to him and lowers his voice. "I repaid my debt to him." His words hold a threat.

The urge to break the hand that clutches mine rises inside of me, and then I push the feeling aside, taking deep breaths. This prissy man knows less about my kind than I even imagined. Debts are something tangible that tie one person to another. My father ran this city, with the threads of people who owed him twisting through every alley and street like a ball of massive string weaved through the city.

But when he died, my brothers and I had felt the burden of his debts tangle around us, the strength of them crushing. The threads pulled us constantly. An irritant, like sand in a tight pair of underwear. We couldn't simply pretend that we hadn't inherited his debts, we *couldn't*. If this man owed my father anything, I would've known it the second we got close enough. Hell, I could close my eyes and run through every person who still owed us.

It wasn't a power I was happy to inherit.

I draw back from the man, trying not to look threatening, but give a smile that's all teeth. "I'm aware." Even though, technically, I'm not.

I make a mental note to go through my father's records and see what deal this man had made with my father. Whatever it was, it must have been something powerful.

His gaze is angry as he gives a sharp nod. "Good. Then you're just here for *the* girl."

Does he really care so little about Alexis? A bitter taste washes over my mouth.

I move onto Mrs. Whithouse. When her pale brown eyes fall on me, her eyes widen and a little gasp slips from her lips. Her gaze moves from my pointed ears, then slowly over my face and down my body like I'm a male dancer at a strip club and she wants nothing more than to stuff some bills in my g-string.

Lifting my hand, I shake her cold one. "I'm sorry for your loss."

One corner of her mouth quirks into a smile, as if we aren't at her son's funeral. "I'm sorry to be forward, but do you have gnome in your bloodline?"

I unclench my teeth. "I do."

"And do you have the ability to grant wishes?"

Granting wishes is a power that only rare bloodlines retain. "Yes."

"Well, we should talk later. I may have a--"

"But I don't. That was my father's work."

She bites her lip. "That's really too bad, but find me if you change your mind. I can really make it worth your while."

I try not to jerk my hand back, before I'm moving onto the sister.

To my surprise, Alexis lingers beside me. Watching and waiting. I'd have thought she might take this opportunity to run for it. Maybe she *had* changed more than I thought.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," I tell Parsilla Whithouse, a woman I'd only heard spoken about in passing.

Her pale brown eyes, so much like her mother's, are filled with tears. She uses one hand, covered with short, black leather gloves, to wipe a stray tear that trails down her cheek. Like her mother, her hair is pulled up in a severe bun, and diamonds decorate her throat and ears.

"Thank you," she whispers. "Smith was… one of a kind."

Alexis moves a little closer to her, lowering her voice. "You remember that time that sexy brunette sauntered up to him and asked him what he thought of her dress?"

A sad smile spreads the young woman's lips. "He said that she was naturally beautiful, but that the dress was one of the ugliest things he'd ever seen."

Alexis snorts, which is fucking darling. "The look on her face…"

Now the young woman really seems to smile. "I thought she was going to slap him." But the smile falters, and her gaze moves to me.

I smile, trying to make her feel more comfortable in my presence. "He sounds like quite the character."

Alexis sighs softly and crosses her arms over her chest. "He was unlike anyone I've met in my life. He was so kind and generous. He laughed easily and loved hard. But he saw the world in black and white, couldn't lie to save his life, and only understood things he could touch and see with his own eyes."

The young woman brushes another tear from her cheek. "I'd give up anything to get him back."

"So would I," Alexis says, and not for the first time I can hear the pain in her voice.

People crowd near my side, waiting to pay their respects to the sister. "We should go."

Alexis nods and avoids my gaze as she moves to where the coffin is slowly being covered by dirt. She says nothing to the two men with shovels. Instead, she stares down at the mahogany coffin, then up to the giant picture surrounded by white roses.

I look at the image too. The man in the photo has an unexpected youthfulness to him, like in life he had a permanent smile. His hair is dark brown and surprisingly too long and a mess. His blue tie is askew and his cheeks have deep dimples.

"He looks like a nice guy."

"He was." Alexis looks away as she rubs away a tear from her face.

Seeing her crying does something to me. I reach for her, then realize what I'm doing and drop my hands. Most of our debts require money or the possession of something precious. It was strange to think from this day forward we'd own Alexis. What we would do with her… we weren't sure. We'd

talked about it many times but never agreed on a plan.

Hyde thought she should handle anything related to the family business. An unpaid scapegoat when we all left, after the debts had been handled, to watch over the things we wanted to keep, and sell items we didn't want. Like our own personal free pawn shop worker.

I wanted… I didn't know what I wanted. But not that.

And yet, we're only prolonging the inevitable by lingering here. "We need to go."

Her spine stiffens.

Suddenly, Mr. Whithouse is beside her. "Can I steal you for a second?"

I want to protest. There isn't a chance in hell I'm going to go too far from Alexis. If I lost her again, I'd never hear the end of it from my brothers. But Alexis answers first, "yes."

And unless I want to cause a scene, I have to allow it. Which irritates me.

How many times had we almost caught her? Too many.

They move away from the mourning people, circling a little further from the coffin. I'm about to follow them, when they stop. I calculate the distance between us and decide they're still close enough that they can't outrun me. So I circle a little closer, onto the other side of the coffin, and stare down as if paying my respects, my gaze never leaving Alexis.

"Why hello again."

I jerk. Mrs. Whithouse is near me. Far too fucking close. I must be losing some of my edge, because the prissy woman should never have gotten so close without me sensing her. Or maybe it was because Alexis is here. Distracting me.

"Can we talk?"

I nod.

"Years ago your father made a deal with my husband."

This can't be good.

"It took awhile for me to learn what he asked for, but I eventually discovered it. He wanted me to never learn the name of his mistress. In exchange for that, he gave your father a family heirloom from my mother. A jade necklace in the shape of a rose. I would like to have the heirloom back and know the name of his whore."

"Like I said--"

"You're out of the business, I heard. But with this deal, I can pay right away."

I have no desire to do any of my father's business, but I find myself intrigued. "What's the deal?"

Her arms fold in front of her chest. "Your choice. You can either have my daughter, to do with what you will--"

"Your daughter?" My voice increases, and I force myself to calm.

I'd thought Alexis's parents were the most disgusting pieces of shit I'd ever encountered. People gave up many things, but few people were cold-hearted enough to sell their child.

She nods toward the young woman. "Most men would be intrigued by a young, beautiful woman."

"And what's the other option?"

"My husband has a rare Ferrari worth over two million dollars."

Hell, that was tempting. "I'm getting out of the business…"

She shrugs. "I'll find another gnome then."

"Wait." Fuck, if she makes this deal with another gnome, I have no doubt they'll take the girl over the car. There are few things more precious than a life. "Deal."

She smiles and shakes my hand. I discover a card in my palm when she pulls it away. "Give me a call, and I'll arrange everything."

"Of course."

As she walks away, I look between Alexis and the young woman. Why the hell had I made the deal? My brothers would be pissed as hell when they found out. Hyde would lose his shit. Zard would wince and tell me I fucked up. But still, I didn't regret it. A woman like Mrs. Whithouse had the resources to get what she wanted, with or without me.

Suddenly, I see Alexis's expression change. She seems upset. Her voice lifts. And before I know what I'm doing, I'm coming toward her, my hands curled into fists. I know right now she and I are supposed to be enemies. But for some reason, I have the desire to do anything in my power to protect her.

Images flash in my mind of five years ago. Our kiss. The taste of her lips. The sweet scent of her flowery perfume. Those wide eyes of hers staring up at me as she clung to my shirt. And then there was the way my heart raced. The way something inside of me whispered that this woman could be my everything.

And how I'd thrown it all away.

"Everything okay?" I ask, stopping in front of them.

Both Alexis and the man turn to me with wide eyes, but it's Alexis who speaks. "You bastard!"

I lift a brow. "I'm sorry?"

"Apparently, Smith made a deal with your father. Which is why he killed himself!"

"What?"

Instead of answering, she whirls on her boots and storms away.

I start to go after her and Mr. Whithouse catches my arm. "His debt doesn't become mine."

Rage makes my blood boil. I look at him and he jerks back from me. "You, sir, are a shit human being."

And then I continue after Alexis. Everything inside of me wants to comfort her. But unfortunately, I'm chasing her to catch her. I'm chasing her to fulfill this debt and be one step closer to my freedom.

Even if the one thing missing from my life is the only thing I can't have. Not after I enslave her.

6

Alexis

I run as long and hard as my legs and lungs can handle. Unfortunately, it's nowhere near far or fast enough to outrun the Stiltskin brothers. My mind is still reeling over what Mr. Whithouse's urgent whispers had revealed. Smith had made a deal with Rumple.

He was my best friend. He knew how much my mother's deal had hurt me and yet he did the exact same thing. Okay, so not exact since he didn't have a daughter to sell, but the feeling was still the same. What did he want from Rumple? What had he offered Rumple? Mr. Whithouse hadn't known any of the details, or hadn't wanted to tell me. All he wanted was to find out what I knew and to warn me away from Rumple's son.

The man had clearly forgotten how my mother got to where she was.

It is amazing how the sordid details of rich people's lives are so easily forgotten. Part of me wonders if it is Rumple's magic at work. Hard to get more people willing to barter with something precious when the others are disgraced and outcast from society.

A hand lands on my wrist as I run past the gate to the cemetery, nearly causing me to fall on my face. Zard's grip is warm and strong, enough so that when I do tip forward, he lifts me up by my arm, preventing me from kissing concrete. It wouldn't have been the first time but I prefer to avoid it if possible.

"Let me go! You asshole! You and your brothers can go to hell!" I scream loud enough that my throat scratches by the time I'm done. I try to send my magic up his arm, but it's like water on oil. Something's changed since last time, and whatever I put out just washes back into me. This certainly makes me rethink my plans.

"Sweetheart," Zard begins, looking startled by my outburst.

I interrupt him before he gets any further, "Don't 'Sweetheart' me. My best friend killed himself to get away from you and your family. I'm not your sweetheart and never will be unless you can bring Smith back to life."

"We had nothing to do with Smith's death or whatever deal he made was with our father." Zard's voice is hard with anger, the same anger that flashes in his eyes when I look up at him, defiant until the end.

"You're collecting his debts. You're responsible for this." I point at him, stabbing my finger into his chest, trying to ignore the firm muscle under my fingertip.

Crax and Hyde decide to show up at that point, after I had successfully avoided them on my initial escape attempt. I ignore them. Hell, I'd ignore Zard too if I could, but his grip on my wrist is starting

to hurt, and I'm sure there will be a bruise there tomorrow. It's not completely his fault though since I'm the one yanking my wrist every so often to try and get out of his grip.

"Does this count as her causing a scene?" Hyde asks, barely even out of breath while I'm still gasping.

"Does being one of Rumple's creations mean that you have no soul?" I sneer at him.

"No, he beat it out of me years ago," Hyde says, his tone unexpectedly vicious.

Tension ratchets up through our small group, and I suspect this isn't something they talk about. Abuse isn't exactly a topic for polite conversation. Polite conversation could suck it, though. It was boring and never revealed anything interesting except people's opinions on the weather.

"You're done making a scene. Yes, Smith made a deal, yes, he killed himself to get out of it evidently, but if you think we're out here collecting debts for shits and giggles then you're out of your damn mind. Get in the fucking car or so help me I will make you and my brothers won't be able to stop me," Hyde growls at me, stepping into my personal space.

"Make me," I snarl back.

Without warning, his hand rips Zard's from my arm and he throws me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I scream and struggle but no one comes to help. Crax and Zard just look on sadly as though they had expected something like this to happen but had been hoping to avoid it. Yeah, well, me too. Me fucking too.

I pound my fists on Hyde's back and kick my legs until I start connecting with his chest or stomach or whatever. The hand that's holding me in place slips from the back of my knees to my ankles, pinning them to his torso. His other hand comes up and lands on my ass with a crack of sound splitting the silence. I'm stunned.

He spanked me. Like I was a naughty child or something.

My body betrays me and flushes with heat. I definitely should not be turned on right now. Not right after Smith's funeral. And definitely not by Hyde and his vicious hands. I gulp in air, willing my body to calm down.

"Let me down. Let me go!" I yell into Hyde's back.

"No," he grunts.

I lift my head and look at Crax and Zard. "Make him put me down," I say, trying not to sound desperate.

"We've never been able to control Hyde, you know that," Crax says with a shake of his head while Zard just shrugs and nods toward Crax to indicate agreement.

I let out a noise of frustration and smack at Hyde's back again since I can't move my legs with him pinning them down. It's all I have left to show how utterly pissed off I am. His hand lands on my ass again, leaving a stinging sensation behind. "You're a pig, do you know that?"

"Babe, I've been called so much worse. You'll actually have to put effort in, use those brain cells of yours, and think about it if you want to insult me," Hyde grumbles, his voice rumbling through his body against my own.

Before I can start on another tantrum, because that's definitely what they are making it feel like, Hyde rolls me off his shoulder and shoves me unceremoniously into the back of a car. Zard climbs in after me. I reach for the door handle on the other side of the car, but Crax is already there, making me almost grab his hand instead of the door handle as he slides in on the other side.

Pinned between them, body humming from my strange reaction to Hyde, is not where I want to be. Not in the least. They're both crowding my space, pressing against me everywhere, all down my thighs, my upper arms, even my calves since they're both man-spreading. All the contact after months

and months of nothing makes me feel like a live wire. Volatile and liable to explode at any moment.

Hyde slides into the driver's seat, which is no surprise since he seems like the type to be uncomfortable with someone else driving, and the car roars to life. He drives like a maniac through the city, treating other cars as though they are obstacles for him to maneuver around instead of other people. Yellow lights are just a suggestion. And stop signs? Well, I don't think the wheels ever actually stopped moving.

We are heading in the opposite direction than I expected though. The rich, pompous-ass side of town is on the west, and we've been going east for a while now. Nothing out here is where I would expect the sons of Rumple Stiltskin to live. I pack my judgy pants away though; maybe I'm misunderstanding something.

The building we stop in front of looks rundown. Paint is peeling on each panel of siding, and the windows look grimey, as though no one has cleaned them in years. I am guessing that the building had been cream at some point, or maybe it was white that had just aged badly, I honestly can't tell which. When the guys get out of the car and wait for me I am honestly surprised. If there wasn't a sign that read 'Stiltskin's' above the door I would have questioned where we were.

"Don't make me come in there and get you," Hyde growls just as I start to move to the door. The defiant side of me wants to stop and plant myself in place, but I don't; instead, I keep moving forward. It's all I have left.

"Keep your pants on," I mumble as I get out.

"Were you thinking about him with his pants off?" Zard asks, suddenly too close with that hypnotic stare of his.

My eyes snap to his and a blush suffuses my cheeks, giving me away. Zard merely winks at me and leans down so his lips brush the shell of my ear as he whispers, "Your secret's safe with me, Sweetheart."

As swiftly as he invaded my personal space he's gone, and I feel bereft, the warmth of his body and personality leaving me feeling the cold more noticeably. I look at the others and Hyde is unlocking the front door of the shop while Crax is watching me like a hawk, as though he's expecting me to make another break for it.

I won't.

Not now. I know that if I want to escape the clutches of the Stiltskin brothers then I'll need to bide my time and plan. If I just make a break for it, especially in an area of town I'm unfamiliar with but that they probably know like the back of their hand, they'll catch me and, I have no doubt, punish me. Something tells me that Hyde would enjoy that a little too much.

The bell over the door rings, drawing my attention to the fact that Hyde is now in the shop and Zard has followed him. Crax holds his arm out, gesturing for me to go ahead of him. It would be gentlemanly if I didn't know that he was doing it just to stop my escape. I smile a little at the thought of tricking them all and escaping later. Crax grins back, evidently assuming the smile is for him. I don't dissuade him of that notion.

Inside the store is clean but cluttered. Nicknacks cover every available surface. It's only as I look more closely at some of the things that I see the valuable items hidden among the trash. What is this place?

I follow the guys through to a small back area in the store that is about the size of a closet, before we turn and head up the stairs that branch off one side of the tiny room. The space at the top of the stairs is so different from what was below that my brain stutters momentarily. Sleek lines and sharp, spotless furniture decorate the space, which is covered in white, black, and gray with the occasional

pop of navy blue. I never thought of navy blue as a color that popped, but in this monotone room it did.

A kitchen came off one side that was almost as big as my parents'. Between the living room and kitchen is a fireplace that is encased in glass so it can be seen from three sides, which make it an unobtrusive divider between the two areas in an otherwise open floor plan. Another set of stairs go up on the side next to the kitchen.

I continue to follow the guys up, ever aware of Crax's presence at my back. The fact that I'm gawking at the sleek luxury of their apartment or townhouse or whatever it's called has to be obvious, and it's a fight not to look over my shoulder to see if Crax is watching me. I focus instead on the stairs in front of me, which instead of being old wood with more peeling paint are covered with a thick, luscious carpet that feels bouncy under my feet. I almost ask if I should take my shoes off, but I don't.

At the top of the stairs is a hallway with rooms coming off it, two doors on each side and a bathroom at the end. I know it's a bathroom because the door is open and as I peer around Zard and Hyde I can see the sink and mirror that sit in front of the door. I can also see all their personal items around the sink. Toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, etc. It makes me feel awkward, like I'm somewhere that's much too private and personal for someone like me.

They stop at the first door on the right and Hyde flings it open, letting it smack against the doorstop unapologetically. The room looks like an add-on from the decor downstairs. All black, white, gray, and blue. A large bed dominates the room but there's a closet and a desk and chair as well. It gives me the feeling of a hotel without the ick factor of the ones I can afford. This would be in a nice hotel, one where they had complimentary skin care products and robes for everyone.

"This is your room," Crax says, reminding me that he was behind me.

"You mean I'm not going to be chained in a cell? How will you stop me from escaping?" I gasp in mock horror.

"This can change if you push us," Hyde says, the *us* changing in my head to me. I know he's the only one who would want to have me under lock and key.

"And what am I supposed to do with my days? Are you going to feed me? Clothe me?" I ask, spinning to face each one of them. I have to take a step back so I'm now inside what is supposed to be my room.

"We are still figuring that out," Crax says, shooting Hyde a glare when his brother opens his mouth to reply.

I glare at all three of them before reaching out and grasping the door with my fingertips, slamming it shut in their faces.

7

Zard

I grab a bottle of my father's expensive scotch and plop down on the couch, putting my feet on the coffee table for the first time in my life. I see Crax lift a brow and wait to see if he's going to say anything. The truth is, I don't envy him. After being under my father's thumb for so long, he's strung higher than a violin. I know for a fact that just about everything we did drove him crazy. I also know for a fact that he fought to say anything with every ounce of his being.

At last, his gaze jerks from my muddy boots, and he sits down lightly beside me.

I grin and crack open the bottle before slamming some.

Crax surprises me by reaching for it and taking a long swig himself.

Hum, he must have really changed more than I thought. It seemed more natural for him to lecture me about randomly opening a five hundred dollar bottle of scotch than to enjoy it with me. Or maybe capturing Alexis had affected him more than he was letting on.

"She's changed," he says, wiping his mouth and handing the bottle back to me.

"Not in any of the ways that count. She's still hot as fuck and knows how to handle herself."

Crax nods. "So now we just need to figure out what to do with her."

Hyde starts to pace by the open window. "The goal is to collect the asshole's debts and get out of here. So let's fucking do it!"

"It's not that easy and you know it," Crax says, and there's a hint of frustration in his normally calm voice. "The other debts were simpler. A thousand pieces of gold. A family heirloom. A boat. A house. Owning someone… it isn't as simple."

Hyde freezes in his pacing and whirls to face Crax. "So, we have her work the fucking shop and sell all of our dad's shit. Free labor for eternity, and the deal is done."

Crax frowns. "There has to be another way."

Hyde's hand curls into a fist. "You just don't like the idea of her being unhappy. Well, I don't care if she's happy or not, this is about our freedom."

"I want to be free too--"

"Yeah, so you can go back to your prissy little lawyer life."

Crax stands. "I'm sorry I made something of myself."

"Yeah, all you had to do was leave us here with the monster."

Crax flinches. "I was going to come back for you."

"Sure you were. You just didn't."

Crax runs his fingers through his perfect blond hair, ruffling the strands. His mouth opens, but no

words come out. Slowly, he sits back down, and Hyde goes back to pacing.

I stare between the two of them, trying to decide what the hell to say to break the tension. But, for once, I can't think of anything. This argument between them, it was about more than just the beautiful woman in the room upstairs. It was a deep wound between them that might never be healed.

"Maybe let's just focus on our next debt," I say, choosing my words with care.

Crax nods slowly. "I think we go with the next easiest one and work our way up to the more difficult ones."

"And who left you in charge?" Hyde challenges.

I shake my head. "We're never going to get anywhere if we can't work together."

Hyde huffs. "I don't want to work with him."

Fuck. It's hard to watch this. We were all so close before. Every single day I thought Crax was going to break. It was even a little joke Hyde and I had: "When will Crax crack?" And then he'd turned eighteen. Rumple had always thought Crax would take over the family business, but with hardly a word, Crax had confessed he'd applied to colleges around the country. He'd gotten a full-ride scholarship and was leaving that day.

Our dad had begged and pleaded with him to stay. And then I was pretty damn sure he cursed him. Crax had told us one day he'd be back for us. And I believed him with every fiber of my being that when he made enough money to support us, he would be. But things had turned dark here. Rumple had taken his anger at losing his first born out on Hyde, and our brother had changed beneath our dad's bloody fists.

I tried to step in. I tried to make things better. But I only ever made them worse.

But somehow, I could never seem to stop trying. "Can't we all just get along?"

"No," Hyde says at the same moment Crax says, "Yes."

Crax's emotions spill over his face in a way that makes my whole chest ache. I knew he was going to come back. I also know it was too late by then. Why couldn't Hyde see that Crax had probably beaten himself up every single day of his life for failing us? Because I could see it.

I drink more and so does Crax. None of us speak for a long time. And then Crax's phone rings.

He answers it slowly. "Hello?" There's a strained pause. "Okay, we'll come collect it."

When he hangs up the phone, Hyde asks, "What was that?"

"Lady White, the banshee, wants us to come collect her voice."

"Fuck," I say, "I thought she'd fight us with every fiber of her being."

Crax shrugs. "Maybe something in our lives will be easy."

Hyde huffs. "Nothing is easy. It's probably a damn trap."

Crax rises, his back stiff. "Then don't come."

As he heads for the door, I sigh and rise to follow him.

"You know I'm coming," Hyde says. "You guys will get fucked without me."

We're at the door before Crax freezes and looks back. "Wait, what the hell do we do with Alexis?"

Hyde glowers at her door. "We need more time to create a spell that binds her to the shop."

Crax looks thoughtful for a long minute. "I guess, for now, we take her with us."

"She'll try to escape," Hyde warns.

Crax gives him an irritated look. "Of course she will, but we don't have a choice."

Ignoring the dirty looks they give each other, I go to her door and rap on the wood. "Hey, Sweetheart, guess what? We're going banshee hunting!"

The door creaks open a second later. "What did you just say?"

It takes me a second to answer. Alexis is fucking beautiful. Hyde might have pretended to spank her in anger, but I knew damned well he'd just wanted to touch that perfect ass of hers. Not that I blame him.

She lifts a brow, and I remember to speak. "We're going banshee hunting, and you're coming with us."

I know she must be plotting something when she leaves her room without a fight, head held high. She follows us down into the shop where Crax goes to reach for one of the empty bottles that line the shop's back shelf. I watch in fascination as he speaks the words of the spell and pulls on the thread of the banshee's deal. Within seconds, the bottle glows a pale white.

Hyde and I could collect debts, but we couldn't do all the spells our father could. That privilege had fallen on the first born… something that drove Hyde crazy.

"What's that for?" Alexis asks, and there's wonder in her voice.

Crax looks sad. "It's for her voice."

"Her voice?"

The pained look in his face grows. "Lady White's."

Her mouth drops open. "She's one of the top singers of our time."

Crax nods. "She made a deal with Rumple to become a famous singer. But she only had ten years, and then she'd become mute. Her ten years ended shortly after my father died."

She shakes her head. "Who would do that?"

"You know the kind of people who do that," Crax says, too softly.

We all start toward the door. I try not to notice the weight that seems to have descended on Crax's shoulders, but I know him too well not to notice. Collecting these debts is the only way we'll ever be free. But a man as empathetic as Crax… I wasn't sure who he'd become by the end of this.

Hell, I didn't know who any of us was going to become. And that scares me a little.

8

Alexis

THE CAR RIDE over to Lady White's place was awkward, to say the least. There's clearly some unresolved tension between the brothers that I want nothing to do with. It was painfully obvious when there was a standoff between Crax and Hyde about who was driving. I thought they were going to come to blows before Hyde reminded Crax that he'd been drinking. I wasn't sure if I'd ever seen Hyde look more smug than when he got in the driver's seat after that. The rest of the ride was silent though, aside from a few awkward throat clearings.

Now we're almost to my parents' castle-like house and my heart feels like it's hammering in my chest. I'm surprised that the guys haven't commented on it, because I'm sure I can't be the only one who hears it. We stop a few properties away from my childhood home, and a wave of relief washes over me that we don't get any closer than that. I say properties instead of blocks because these buildings are so much bigger than houses, and they sit on massive plots of land that ensure privacy for each family.

As we all get out of the car, Hyde takes me by the elbow and hisses in my ear, "Don't try to run and don't beg her to save you or this will go badly. The only reason we brought you along was because we can't trust you alone."

"Wasn't planning on doing either," I whisper back at him, letting my tone show exactly what I thought of his comments, as we followed the winding path that led to the front door.

When we reach our destination it's only to find the door ajar. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Nothing good ever comes from situations like this.

Crax knocks on the thick, aged wood panels of the door, which only pushes the door open further. Suddenly, a man is there, dressed in a simple suit, who looks like he's been... crying?

"You're Rumple's boys?" he asks without any preamble.

"We are," Crax says. "And... guest." He gestures to me at the end and I nod at the man standing in the doorway.

He sniffs as he looks down at me, but not in a dismissive way, just the sniff of someone who is struggling to control their emotions. A watery smile fills his face. "An angel at the end, it's exactly what she deserves," he says under his breath as he looks at me before adding, "Follow me."

We oblige and I try not to gawk at the house of the famous, or infamous, depending on who you

talk to, Lady White. I try not to let the fact that the only reason, or at least the main reason, she is considered such an amazing singer is because of a deal with Rumple, make me bitter. It is an uphill climb though.

The man who had answered the door, kind of, opens a set of double doors and we walk into a large, airy room that looks out over the estate's grounds. Sitting out on the patio in a lounge chair is Lady White. One hand lolls off the arm rest while the other appears to be holding a cocktail of some kind that she's sipping on.

When the butler, for lack of a better thing to call him, leads us out to the sitting area, he leans down and whispers something in Lady White's ear. I'm not sure what he says but she gives him a single nod. He scurries off, leaving us behind with a woman who might be an amazing singer, but is also considered one of the biggest divas out there. Which is exactly why I wasn't surprised to find her wearing large sunglasses that covered most of her face in the evening light.

"Gentlemen, and guest, thank you for coming so quickly. I know it was short notice," she begins, overly pronouncing each word as though she's savoring the last time she'll be using her voice. "I want to make a new deal."

"I'm afraid it doesn't work that way," Crax replies. "Once the deal is struck it must be adhered to, or both parties will suffer the consequences. It's the only reason we are collecting our father's debts in the first place."

I want to snap my head and look up at Crax so I can judge the truthfulness of his words, but I don't. I look straight ahead at what is the most famous person I was ever likely to meet. He was probably just saying that to make her feel better.

"I was afraid you'd say something like that," she says with an overly dramatic sigh. For the first time, she takes off her sunglasses. Her eyes are rimmed with red and to the untrained eye it would look like she'd been crying, but there's something off about it, something that screams at me that this effect was achieved by makeup, not actual tears.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way, truly I am, but we don't have a choice," Zard chimes in, surprising me.

"Then neither do I." She stands and moves away from our little group. Not far, and not fast enough to think she's trying to make a run for it. "There are snipers in the trees surrounding us." She pauses and lifts her left hand, the one not still holding the cocktail, and when I turn to look at the guys I see red dots have appeared on their chests and foreheads. "They will shoot you if we can't come to some sort of agreement. You won't be allowed to leave with my voice."

Fuck.

I knew they wouldn't lie about the restrictions on their magic. Plus, I had hoped that they had more than just a sick curiosity since they came for me again. Hearing that they didn’t have a choice in collecting the debts was surprising though. If the magic was so dangerous that not following through on a deal would hurt someone, then what would happen if one of them died? I wasn’t sure, but we were going to find out if we didn't do something. And while Lady White might be willing to risk the consequences of leaving deals open with no one to claim them, I wasn't.

"I'm sorry," I say quickly as I take a step toward her, working on instinct. "I know this is awkward and I'm picking the worst moment to do this, but just in case we don't make it out of here alive, I was wondering if I could shake the hand of the phenomenal Lady White."

"You really want to do this right now?" she asks, sounding confused.

"Yeah, before they put their feet in their mouths again and get us all killed," I say with my best fangirl smile as I jerk my thumb over my shoulder at the guys.

"Fine, fine, hurry up," she replies, extending her hand to me.

As soon as our skin connects I push my magic into her. Then I get to experience one of my favorite things. The surprise that crosses her face when she first feels my magic and the jolt of panic that runs down her arm and seems to reverberate off my own. Her eyes widen as she looks down at me, clearly thinking I was a regular human until that moment.

Gold rushes up her arm and she tries to pull away, but she can no longer move. There's no escape once the golden curse starts and if it gets to her heart? Bye, bye, Lady White.

"What is this?" she demands, looking down at where we are still connected.

I release her and turn away, walking toward the guys and turning back to face her as I spoke. "This is my curse. The little hiccup in messing with magic to get what you want. See, my mother sold me to Rumple before I'd even been born, all to get her own selfish desires. Now, here you are threatening to kill four people so you can go back on your word. Tsk tsk, Lady White. Now, you have two options. You can either give the boys here your voice, or you can die, because once that gold reaches your heart it will stop beating and become a lump of metal in your chest. Decide fast, or the choice will be taken from you and you'll be a statue for the rest of your life."

Her face displays a series of emotions, before landing on anger. "They'll kill you if you hurt me," she shrieks.

"You mean the laser pointers in the trees?" I ask. I'd noticed as I walked back toward the guys that there were red dots not just hitting them, but hitting the house and the sliding glass door as well. Anyone with any sense would realize that someone aiming a gun with a laser sight wouldn't accidentally aim at the house or window. My guess is that there are lines of laser pointers directed at about chest height and another set at about head height. So long as the butler put us in the right spot all it would take is the flip of a switch to make us think we were being targeted.

Anger morphs to outrage and I know in that moment that I'm right.

Before she can tear into me though I remind her, "Tick tock, Lady White. That gold is past your shoulder now. You can live without a voice or you can die. It's your choice."

"Fine, I'll give you my voice, but don't think this is over," she growls at me.

I've made an enemy out of a powerful woman, but she didn't appreciate the consequences of magic. Now I think she might a little more.

I turn to Crax, whose mouth is hanging open, and wave him forward, since he's the one holding the glowing white bottle. I clear my throat when he doesn't move, which snaps him out of whatever daze he'd fallen into. He takes a few strides toward Lady White, still eyeing the trees warily.

He carefully unstoppers the bottle and holds it in front of her mouth. "Now, sing."

Lady White is actually crying now, making what I had suspected was makeup earlier start to run down her face in big red, pink, and black streaks. A tiny part of my soul twinges at what is about to happen as she opens her mouth and starts singing. It's beautiful, the opposite of what I'd normally think of when it came to banshees.

When she pauses, seemingly to cry a little more, Crax says, "Keep singing."

Finally, after she sang at least a full two minutes of *Ave Maria,* the bottle turns a deep purple color. Crax puts the stopper back on and I reach out and run my hand across the gold that coats her arm.

"It'll fade in a couple of hours and you'll be able to move again." I turn and walk away from her and leave the mansion through the same path I entered, not caring if the guys are behind me or not. When I reach the car I lean against the side and wait, knowing they'll probably scold me for my actions, but I don't give a shit. I didn't want my soul twisted and warped because of some magic that

got all weird when it couldn't be claimed.

9

Alexis

NONE of them speak as we head home, except when they stop at my favorite Chinese place to ask for my order. I don't hesitate to list off all my favorite things, and then I dare them with my eyes to say a damned thing about how much I ordered. Zard opens his mouth, then seems to notice my, "say it and die" look before hightailing it out of the car.

I tap my fingers against my thigh, my gaze darting all around. I could try to escape now, but then I bet these assholes would eat my food. Then I think of Lady White and decide maybe I'll wait before bolting. I don't want to be anyone's property, but I also don't want the deal's magic to twist me. But if they ask me to do anything crazy, twisted soul or not, I'll run for it.

Zard's back in the car in no time and we're zooming down the road before coming back to the strange crumbling place that seems to serve as some kind of shop as well as their current home. I try not to think about them growing up here as we climb out of the car. Down the road, trash cans burn in alleys. I know enough to know that homeless people are no doubt warming themselves by the fires. Women linger on the corners, cloaked in shadows, and my stomach gives a little twist. Compared to how I grew up, this was night and day.

I wanted to pretend that Rumple at least gave them the love I didn't receive, but I'd met these guys. Good fathers didn't raise men as broken as these three. It seems as if his reputation for cruelty wasn't just in his professional life.

"Coming?" Zard asks, offering me his arm.

I lift a brow and walk past him.

Crax unlocks the door, cautious of the glowing bottle in his hands. We all enter, and he goes to the back case and types in a code. A gasp slips from my lips as a large, vault-like door swings open, and I can't help but stare at the hundreds of glowing bottles that line the shelves, covering the walls in the massive room concealed behind the coded-door.

"Are those all voices?"

Crax flinches. "I wish."

"What else are they?" I ask.

My words seem to fall into the silence. For a minute, none of them look at me, and I'm pretty damned sure that they don't plan to answer.

But then, Crax begins to point to bottles. “This one is the ability to laugh, this one to cry, this one is her innocence, this one is his sanity.” His voice grows softer as he moves down the bottles. “This one… the ability to have a child. This one is his luck. And this one… ten years of his life. This one is thirty years of hers.”

I curse under my breath. “What the hell did these people want so badly to make these kinds of deals?”

Crax closes the door and locks it back up. “All kinds of different things. But I can tell you, I think nearly every person came to eventually regret their deals.”

“Then why do people keep coming back?”

“Because they’re greedy fools,” Hyde says, his words almost a growl.

Crax’s soft, golden eyes fall onto mine. “Or they were desperate. And unfortunately in this world, there are always people willing to take advantage of the desperate.”

“Amen,” Zard says, followed by a tired sigh.

Crax lifts a hand and sweeps it over the room. “Everything in this room was something Rumple traded for.”

“Some of these things don’t seem to have a lot of value,” I say, picking up a pretty little doll with red hair.

“Rumple was… an interesting man. Sometimes it wasn’t about the actual value of an item, it was the value of the item to the person.” Crax looks pained, like he’s staring at a room full of ghosts. “Which makes this place all the worse.”

I stare at him before setting the doll gently back down on the countertop, and I hate that something inside of me gentles. “You guys really don’t like this job, do you?”

“It’s like slitting your throat slowly,” Hyde says, and I hate how factual his words are.

Shit. Would I want to have these burdens on my shoulders? I shake myself. I will *not* feel sorry for these assholes. I will *not*!

“Let’s eat,” Zard says, lifting up the bags.

Crax nods and leads us back up the stairs. He hands out everything at the table and the guys go to the pristine white couches and sit down, flipping on some football on the TV.

I stand looking at all of them. “Are you sure we should eat on these couches? They seem so pretty.”

Hyde huffs, “Yeah, Rumple caught me eating a granola bar on one once and broke my eardrum.”

Crax stiffens. “I didn’t know that.”

“There’s a lot you fucking missed away at your little golden college.”

“I said I was sorry!”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it.” Rage flashes in Hyde’s eyes.

Tension sings between them, and I get the unexplainable feeling that so much hurt strings between all of these men, to the point that they’re ready to explode. It doesn’t seem to matter to them that the man who deserves their wrath is dead. They’re hurting, and they want to hurt someone else to make it better.

I move between them and set my bag on the coffee table. Opening my package of sweet and sour sauce, I decide to make the ultimate sacrifice, even though I don’t know why. I lift the cup over one of the white chairs. Suddenly, all eyes are on me. I turn it over and the bright orangish-red liquid spills onto the chair as their mouths curl into O’s of surprise.

When I flip it back and set the cup on the table, Crax stutters out, “Wh-Why did you do that?”

“Because Rumple is dead.”

"We know that--" he continues.

"Do you?" I lift a brow. "Because it seems to me all of you are angry at him, but you're taking it out on the only people left who will let you… which is each other. And that's fucking sad."

"You don't understand anything," Hyde grumbles, but the rage has vanished from his eyes. The poor guy just stares at the dripping sweet and sour sauce like he's waiting for Rumple to emerge from the grave and beat him again.

Shit. That soft spot inside of me is growing.

I grab napkins from the bag and smear the sauce around, both cleaning it up and making it worse at the same time, while they stare in shock. And then I put the remainder of the napkins down and sit on them, reaching for the rest of my food.

"You're incredible," Crax says.

I freeze, clutching my plastic container of chicken. "Ah shucks, no need to flatter me. My ego is big enough."

He shakes his head. "I mean it… the way you shut things down now. The way you handled Lady White."

"No, Crax--" Hyde begins.

"We don't want to own you, Alexis. I hope you know that. We'd planned to have you work the shop, but I think I have another deal for you."

"I thought you couldn't change deals," I say.

"We can't change them per say, but we can adjust them."

"I'm listening." I continue eating my chicken, trying to play it cool, even though my heart pounds.

"What if you helped us collect the remainder of our debts? The work is harder and definitely more dangerous, so we could change it so that instead of owning you forever, we only own you until the debts are collected."

"We don't need her," Hyde snarls.

"Do we really want to be stuck with each other longer than we have to be?" Crax asks, his voice strangely tense.

Hyde stuffs a giant piece of beef into his mouth and seems to dismiss Crax.

"I for one am enjoying our brotherly time," Zard says, flashing a smile. "But working with Alexis would be fine too."

Crax looks at me. "What do you say?"

I choose my words with care. "So if I do this… if I make this deal… the magic won't go crazy, and I'll get my freedom?"

"Yes."

For the first time in my life, I lift my hand to a Stiltskin brother. "Deal."

Crax shakes my hand, and I'm shocked when a golden light explodes from our touch and dances around our hands for the longest moment before fading. And then I'm left touching him. Crax. He wasn't the first man who'd ever kissed me, but he sure as hell was the first man who left me breathless. And as we stare at each other, time seems to melt away.

I remember him. I remember him so well.

I'd been eating at a diner outside of the crappy hotel I was staying in for one night before continuing my run from Sterling City. There hadn't been anywhere else to sit, and he'd awkwardly asked me if he could sit with me. In those days, I didn't trust much, but I trusted more than I do now. We'd settled into a conversation that felt so easy and comfortable, that my heart had fluttered. When he laughed, his laugh seemed to radiate through me. And when he told a story, I'd found myself lost in

it.

How could I have known it was all a game to him?

I tug my hand away and focus on my food, trying to calm the racing of my heart.

"So we do debt collecting together tomorrow!" Zard exclaims.

"Oh joy," Hyde mutters.

But I ignore them all. This wasn't about our past. This wasn't about their father. This was about earning my freedom, and I'd be damned if the soft spot I was developing for them turned into anything more than that.

10

Alexis

I'm still grinning to myself as I lay down to go to sleep over my stunt with the couch. They hadn't realized what a sacrifice I was making by dumping the sauce that I love so much, but when I stole food from each of them, I think they started to realize. I may or may not have heard a mutter of 'Where is she putting it all?'

Amateurs.

They might not have had love growing up but they had clearly never spent time without food, and it showed. My first year away from home had been an adjustment to say the least, and a lot of the time I hadn't been able to afford to eat. Now? I never missed an opportunity.

That being said, the amount of sodium I'd ingested earlier in the evening was alarming even for me. I can practically feel my body swelling with it. I need water. Stat.

My mind is twisting and turning everything I'd seen and heard since the brothers collected me anyway, so I know I'm not getting to sleep any time soon. I haul myself up, out of bed, feeling the puffiness in my fingers and toes as I start to move through the room. The t-shirt I had worn to bed is just long enough that it covers everything it needs to, so I don't worry about putting anything else on. It is the middle of the night and I'd heard the guys all go to bed, so I'm not worried about them seeing me.

I twist the handle of the door to my room as silently as possible, just to be on the safe side, and when the door swings open without a squeal or whine, I'm grateful. My feet pad down the stairs with less than a whisper on the carpet and I move into the kitchen like a ghost. Their kitchen is still a mystery to me so I go through each cabinet, cupboard, and drawer methodically as I look for some glasses or a mug or something.

Finally, I open a cupboard and on the top shelf are some glasses. They look fancy, and the fact that they are on the top shelf makes me pause, but I don't want to keep searching and risk waking one of them up. I push up onto the counter so I can reach the high shelf and snag a glass, setting it down carefully before I slide down the lower cabinets until my feet touch the floor.

A small light turns on and for a moment I'm worried that I've tripped some kind of alarm. When I spin and hear a throat clear at the same time I know that one of them has found me out, and probably just got a good view of my ass and the pair of panties I was wearing as I got down from the countertop.

Zard is standing there, leaning against the wall doing his best James Dean, or maybe he's just sleepy. "Nice ass," he says as he moves toward me. "Need help finding something?" He picks up the

glass I'd just retrieved and put it back on the top shelf with ease, no climbing on countertops for him, before moving two cabinets over and retrieving a more normal-looking tumbler for me to drink from. He hands it to me and I take it, my fingers brushing against his as I do so.

He inhales sharply, and my eyes jerk to his where I see the lust fire in his eyes.

I clear my throat and back away and say, "I was just getting some water. No escape attempt. Don't worry."

"I know you won't try and escape, at least not yet, unless you have a better plan than what Crax came up with this evening," Zard says with a shrug as he pulls a glass out for himself. He moves to the fridge and pulls out their gallon jug of milk, pouring himself a tall glass that he takes a long pull from. When he's done he literally says "Ahh," which was something I thought was only in TV and movies. "Did you want some?" he asks, lifting the jug of milk in offering.

"No, I was just after some water," I say quietly, trying not to think about the fact that his bicep bulged when he lifted the milk toward me, or the fact that he wasn't wearing a shirt, and definitely not the fact that his pajama pants are so low slung it's almost indecent. His Adam's Apple bobs and I find my mouth even drier than it had been when I came downstairs.

"The good water is in the fridge. It's filtered and tastes way better than tap, trust me on this. I grew up on this stuff." He pulls the large acrylic pitcher from the fridge, the kind with the filter built-in, and pours some into my glass.

"Thanks," I mumble before picking it up and drinking half of it in one go.

"Thirsty?" He raises one eyebrow at me, clearly meaning for something more than just water.

"I think I just got what I needed," I say, trying not to squirm under his heated gaze.

"Needed, maybe. But what about what you want? You're not as sly as you think, Alexis. We all see the way you look at us, and I'm sure you see the way we look at you. We're all adults. We can do business and have some fun on the side if that's what you want?" The longer he speaks the lower his voice drops until it's like a purr in my ear, while my whole body vibrates with desire.

"You want me?" The words slip from my mouth before my brain knows what I'm doing.

"Isn't it obvious?" Zard says as he nods downward. My eyes flick away from his, traveling down his body, taking in the peaks and valleys of the muscle that covers his form until it lands on the tent of his pajama pants. My heart kicks like an untamed horse, rearing up and kicking at my ribs until I almost take a step toward Zard. Almost.

It's as though he senses it though because he takes a step toward me. His whole being invades my space and he's not even that close. We wouldn't even have been chastised at a school dance. But he felt like he was touching me with that intense gaze of his. The liquid gold of his eyes seems to swirl the longer I look at him.

I know I should tell him to back up, to give me some space, hell, I should just take my water and go back to my room, but my mouth won't work. He has probably started to wonder if I'm an idiot because it's been so long since I said anything, but I feel like a war is going on in my body between my baser instincts, which are telling me to rub up on him like a cat in heat, and my brain, which is trying to remind me that, technically, he owns me and the power imbalance between us shouldn't be overlooked.

He takes another step closer and I can feel the heat radiating off his body and surrounding my own. It brings his scent with it, spicy and musky like some of the best men's cologne out there, but I'd be surprised if the way he smelled in that moment came in a bottle.

Zard's hand reaches out and his thumb smooths across my cheekbone as he continues to watch me. It moves from my cheek down across my lower lip and I can't help my reaction as my tongue darts out

and swipes over the tip of his thumb.

His mouth is on mine then. I hadn't even seen him move but he's there, his lips pressing against my own as the hand that had been stroking my face now cups the back of my head. His tongue seeks entrance into my mouth and I welcome it, letting him explore and taste me as I tangle my tongue with his.

I can't get close enough as I press myself up against him, my instincts finally winning out over my head. My hands loop around his neck and slide up into his almost-shoulder-length hair. I grasp a handful of it and tug, making him groan into my mouth. I devour the sound. His hands get bolder as a result and smooth down my body before cupping my ass and lifting me up onto the counter.

My legs spread for him instinctively to get him as close as possible, and when his thick, hard ridge grinds against my core I moan softly. I realize at that moment that there is very little separating us, very little stopping us.

It's as though water has been splashed over my face.

I realize what we are doing and break the kiss, pushing him away and moving past him even as I feel him reach for me. Just before I make it to the stairs I realize I left my drink behind. I turn, head back, and grab it, pointedly not making eye contact with Zard as I feel a blush staining my cheeks and head down the hall.

It's only when I'm safely behind my closed bedroom door that I allow myself to fully breathe again. My body aches with need, to the point that it's uncomfortable, and I want to curse myself for my foolish behavior.

My mind replays what happened and I know if we'd gone much further I would have ended up fucking him on the kitchen counter. I can't be that desperate for attention, touch, love, can I? Not enough that I would turn to the men who own me? Although they do seem conflicted about it. No. I need to keep my pussy on lockdown until this is all over. No more midnight run-ins with sexy men. From now on when I leave this room I'll be fully dressed and have a mental chastity belt in place. I hope.

11

Crax

ALEXIS RIDES in the passenger seat beside me. The windows of my crappy car are unrolled to let a breeze in, and her eyes are closed as the wind whips around her. I know I'm supposed to be watching the road, but my gaze keeps straying back to her. She wears a leather jacket that looks worn and comfortable. It's frayed slightly at her wrists, and I see her fingers play with the strands. Her jeans are long and dark, and she wears daggers at her belt.

She's like a ghost to me. A vision of someone from my past, but not quite them. What happened to the girl in the white sundress with a nervous smile? And who is this?

"I think we needed to turn there," she says, suddenly alert.

How the fuck had she done that?

"Damn it," I mutter. "I'll have to take the next street."

We stop at a light and my car makes a sad sound.

"Question," she begins, her gaze straight ahead. "There was just about every nice car in that garage. Why did we take this beater?"

I stiffen. It wasn't exactly something I wanted to talk about, but I didn't want to lie either. "Those were Rumple's cars. This one is mine. Most of my clients can't afford a lot… Fighting for a cause isn't nearly as profitable as buying souls."

She finally looks toward me. "I understand. Cutting up my parents' credit cards and learning to live on my own was one of the hardest things I ever had to do."

"I bet."

Someone honks behind me.

Damn it, the light had changed. I hadn't even noticed. I'd been too busy looking at the little blonde hairs that had escaped from her ponytail.

Maybe having her working with us wasn't the best idea after all.

"Tell me more about this plan," she says, as if reading my mind.

"Well, we've been trying to collect the debts as quickly as possible, but we realized early on that collecting them on our own wasn't the safest option. But with four of us, we should be able to split up on the easier jobs."

"So Zard and Hyde are collecting…?"

"A debt from a friend."

She winces. "That doesn't sound fun."

I laugh. "Yeah, I don't envy them. But then, these collections are usually pretty nasty."

Her expression grows serious. "So what are we collecting?"

It takes me a minute to answer. We're getting a debt I've been dreading getting. I hadn't wanted to bring Hyde, because he wasn't the most sensitive of people. I'd thought Alexis might actually be able to make it easier.

"The client owes us a ghost."

"A ghost?"

"His… wife has been haunting him since her death. But he kind of loves having her around still."

"So what did he ask for?"

"He wanted the ability to touch a ghost for five years in exchange for us owning his wife's ghost after that."

It takes her a minute to process my words but then her nose scrunches up. "There is *so* much wrong with that."

I nod. "Yeah, the thought of collecting this debt has kept me up a night or two, but we've put it off too long. The weight on our chests gets heavier every day. Today I woke up panting."

She shakes her head. "What the hell did Rumple want with her ghost?"

I feel my expression harden. "Probably to give her to the right buyer. You'd be amazed by the sick bastards who came into the shop looking for ghosts. Especially women who would then be trapped in their houses…"

"Sick fucks."

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. Some of the people we were exposed to as kids were first-class psychopaths. Most of the kids in our classes were scared of the dark, but not us. We were scared of Clarance Bert, a dentist that everyone in town loved but who we knew liked to buy fairies and kept a set of tools I'd only thought lepidopterists used. At night when I closed my eyes, I pictured him using those little tools to carefully mount a screaming fairy to a board. I pictured a room filled with framed pictures of tiny living beings with pins through their limbs.

"What will you do with her?" she asks. "Another bottle?"

I shiver. "We'll try to help her cross over. But if we can't, then we'll find a place for her to haunt. I wouldn't want my worst enemy to spend eternity in a dark cupboard."

I'm surprised when her hand brushes my arm.

My gaze jerks to her, and I frown. "What?"

"Well, for a captor, you're kind of a decent guy."

I hate that my chest aches. "That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

She laughs and shoves me gently.

My heart soars.

And then I see the address we're looking for. It's just off of the main road through town, in a little apartment complex shoved in between shops. Or at least that's how it looks at first glance. But as I pull up to a spot along the road, I realize that it's an old apartment building that was updated and turned into a townhouse. From the outside, it looks perfect. Almost too perfect.

Most people think of haunted houses as dark and filled with cobwebs, but in my line of work I'd learned that any house could have a dark underbelly. And sometimes the prettier the house, the more secrets. I found that to be especially true with Alexis's parents.

But I don't want to think about that right now.

Killing the engine, I step out of the car, careful of the vehicles whizzing by, and join Alexis on the sidewalk. Both of us stare up at the house, and I get the feeling she's as uncomfortable with this job as I am. But it says something about her that she isn't turning and running the hell out of here.

"Ready?"

She nods.

We move to the door, and I ring the bell. For several long minutes we stand there together, and I start to wonder if we're going to have to go around back and break in. But just as I'm studying the windows to decide if they're climbable, the door opens.

A middle-aged man stands on the other side. He's maybe five feet tall and has the look of someone who's recently lost a lot of weight. His hair looks strange, almost like the vast majority of the dark strands aren't his, and he wears skinny jeans with tears in the legs and a shiny silver shirt.

None of which looks normal on him.

"Mr. Burke?"

"Yes?"

I stiffen my shoulders, ready for whatever this asshole plans to do to us. "You made a deal with my father, Rumple Stiltskin, five and a half years ago. I'm his son, and I'm here to collect that debt."

To my surprise, he looks irritated. "Finally! You know it was supposed to just be five years, right?"

Alexis and I exchange a confused glance, but the man sweeps open the door and gestures for us to both come in. We do, cautiously. I think we both expected this man to put up more of a fight about losing his wife.

The man heads up a set of stairs, looking behind him. "So, at first, I thought I'd never want to lose my wife. And, like most men, I thought nothing would be better than having her here at my house at my beck and call." His eyes meet mine, and he winks. "Right? Wrong. The second I started trying to better myself, to bring dates home, the fucking bitch flipped. I mean, flipped! I figured I'd never get to enjoy my life until you guys came to collect her."

I see Alexis reach out, and I snatch her arm before she can do whatever the hell she planned to do to him. She gives me that "let me at him" look, but drops her hand when I let go.

"And you know that whole idea of having one woman forever? Well, it becomes more than just words when she's a ghost. You know what I mean?"

I roll my eyes, wishing for the first time I was here to collect his soul. Or his voice. Anything to stop the dick from talking.

We reach a door at the end of the hall, and he throws it open. Instantly, we see a room that has the distinct feel of a guest room. There's nothing personal inside. No pictures. No trinkets. Just a grey bedspread over a twin-sized bed and a rocking chair.

In the rocking chair, a dark-haired ghost sits. Her eyes look dull. She wears pale jeans and a flowery blouse. And I'm thankful, for Alexis's sake, that we can't see any signs of what killed her. In all ways, she looks like a normal, if translucent, person.

"Bella Burke?"

Her gaze snaps up to me. I slowly remove the bottle from my jacket. "We've come here to collect you."

"Collect me?" she says, and there's confusion in her voice.

"Yeah." Alexis nods toward her husband. "Your *prince* sold you in exchange for the ability to touch you."

"Is this true?" the ghost-woman asks.

I steady myself, ready for the attack that's sure to come. Every ghost haunts a place because they have unfinished business. They aren't exactly willing to leave just because someone sold them.

But her husband is the one to answer. "Bella, come on, we both know this is over. You're scaring all my dates. You're making fun of my hair and my new clothes. You're stuck in the past, and baby, I'm all about the future."

The ghost woman moves to him. "Can I still touch him?"

"Until we take you…"

She walks up to her husband, and I want to look away, to give them a final moment together, even though he's a grade-a asshole. But before I do, she slaps him across the face. Hard. "You bastard!" Then she slaps him again. "You trap me here." She slaps him again, and that fake hair of his goes flying, leaving behind a mostly bald man who's gaping at the ghost in shock. "You cheat on me. You talk down to me. And then you *sell* me?" She knocks him so hard that he hits the ground, blood spewing from his nose.

The man looks at us. "Help me!"

I take a step closer. Alexis snags my arm. "You want to enjoy some final moments with your husband, then come out when you're ready?" she asks, her voice sickly sweet and her smile too bright.

"You bet," the wife says, and the way she returns Alexis's smile makes my blood run cold.

When Alexis pushes me back out of the room and closes the door, I'm torn. "Should we really not help?"

"Let him get what he deserves," she tells me, then winks.

I hear the man screaming. I hear the sounds of a struggle. It feels as if a rock sits in my stomach as I fight my urge to go in and stop whatever carnage is unfolding, but Alexis hums beside me.

"Alexis…" I say, preparing my argument as I inch toward the door.

"Whatever she does to him, I promise you it's better than whatever he's been doing to her as his prisoner."

I hate that she's right. And that she's got the balls I don't to handle this so easily.

The screaming and banging continues on for a few more minutes, and then the room goes silent. A minute later, the ghost floats out of the room. I'm shocked to see her covered in blood.

"Did I forget to mention he was the one who killed me in the first place?" she asks.

I feel sick.

"He pushed me right down those stairs. And then set up traps around all the windows and doors so my soul couldn't get free."

Maybe he did get whatever he deserved. "Is he dead?"

Her smile widens. "And he'll be trapped here until someone erases the symbols carved above the exits."

Alexis pushes away from the wall. "That's karma at its finest. So, you ready to go?"

The ghost sighs. "More than ready."

I lift up the bottle and speak the magic words. Her ghost slowly slips into the bottle, and then I close it. Inside, a golden light illuminates the bottle.

Stuffing it into my jacket, I look away from the blood that slides under the door. "You ready to go?"

She nods. "And I have an idea."

A half hour later, we pull up in a spot in Evergreen park. She takes me to the top of a hill where we can see the entire park around us.

“This is my favorite place,” Alexis whispers.

“I can see why.”

“I think we should let her soul go here.”

It seems like as good a place as any, so I lift the bottle to the sunlight and uncork it. Her soul slowly stretches free, and she smiles down at us. The words “Thank you” come like the whisper of the wind, and then her soul fades away.

I don’t even realize it when I take Alexis’s hand. “Where do you think she’ll end up?”

Alexis squeezes my hand. “I don’t know, but I know it’s better than here.”

We stand there for a long time, strangely comfortable together, even in silence, before I sigh and tell her we should head back. We release hands and walk back to the path leading through the park. My thoughts turn as we walk, and I debate about asking about the first time we’d tried to catch her. Whether our time together was special to her too. But just as I get up the nerve to say the words out loud, Alexis gasps beside me.

I look to see her face has gone pale.

“Alexis…”

“Mother?”

My stomach drops as I turn to face the older blonde woman who stands on the sidewalk near us. So, this was the woman who sold her daughter?

12

Alexis

I feel sick. I think I might actually vomit. I'm sure between that and letting a guy get murdered Crax would be really impressed. Not that I want to impress him, but still.

"Alexis?" my mother asks again as though she couldn't believe my answer from before. Her voice rings in my ears louder than the rushing of my blood which, at this point, has drowned everything else. She stands there waiting for a response in her pale blue dress that brings out the color of her eyes. Her cream pumps and tasteful jewelry are so predictable and boring that I want to slap her and tell her to demand more from life.

This is all she ever wanted though. Trophy wife status. To be cared for and pampered with nothing expected in return except the occasional blow job and fuck. Oh, and don't forget keeping her trim figure for public appearances. Her blonde, perfectly curled hair was fake, just like her tits, but they were both so well done that it wasn't obvious. My eyes scan her for a moment, looking for any hint that the woman before me is different from the one I'd left behind, the one who had sold me for her status, wealth, and probably her lithe body as well.

"Mother Dearest," I mutter but I don't bow my head as I would have before. I can't bring myself to look her in the eyes, the same piercing blue as my own, so I look past her instead, as though I don't really see her.

I'm sure she was looking at me and seeing something that was the complete opposite of the daughter that had run away years ago. The tattoos and piercings were just the visible tip of the iceberg. She would be disgusted with my clothes as well, I knew that. She had always said that leather jackets were for hooligans and hookers.

Suddenly reality seems to come rushing back to her. "What are you doing here?" she demands. "Did you follow me? I know what I did wasn't the best but if you're going to start stalking me I'll have to take action, and you won't like the consequences, young lady."

Typical of my mother; it's all about her. I hate it when she calls me young lady and I'm sure she knows it. Just another way for her to needle me.

"We were just setting a trapped soul free, Mrs. Chadwick. It had nothing to do with you," Crax says, coming to my rescue.

"It's Mrs. Chadwick-Bonham to you, whoever you are," she sneers, looking down her nose at both of us. I can practically see the questions in her eyes. *Is he your pimp? Your dealer?* She would take one look at Crax, even in his nice suit, and see the tough man underneath, the man I'd found oh so tempting once upon a time, and still did if I was actually honest with myself, which I'm not.

"I'm Crax, Rumple Stiltskin 's eldest son." He smiles, but there's an edge to it, one that makes my stomach tighten with need. Which, I might add, is not a sane response. I should feel dread or at the very least warning bells should be going off in my head, but instead I can't help but picture him smiling like that at me as he towers over me while he fucks me silly.

I wrench my mind away from the imagery. It's not something I should be imagining with one of my captors, and I shouldn't be kissing them either, but I definitely shouldn't be thinking about any of this in front of my mother. As much as I try, though, my mind continues to swirl with imaginings of us in bed together. I couldn't help but wonder what kind of lover he would be. Tender and sweet or raw and hard? Lordy did I want to find out.

My mother takes a step back at Crax's words, distracting me from the downward, dirty spiral of my thoughts. "You have your debt, I see," she replies coldly. "There's nothing else I owe you or your father."

"We do. And you don't. I want you to know though... You gave up more than you could possibly imagine. Alexis is the jewel of our collection." His eyes flick to me with pride and warmth filling them, but his words turn my stomach. Was I just part of their collection? Just a tool to use while they sought their own freedom no matter what it cost others?

"You're not here for any other reason?" my mother asks again, pushing to verify that we aren't interested in her.

I butt in before Crax can respond, "We weren't, but now I'm wondering what has you so worked up? The woman I knew as Mother wouldn't have been caught dead out here, let alone by herself, and she certainly wouldn't question and berate strangers."

"You're my daughter, not a stranger," she points out when I pause.

"Mother, you may have birthed me, but that was it. I raised myself and I've been completely independent for years, still would be if I hadn't been sold to someone. So let's get one thing straight. We. Are. Strangers. I owe you nothing, you owe me everything, but I'll never collect on that debt because I want as little to do with you as possible." The words are cold and distant and feel like they’re coming from someone else, some other me that is bold and done with bullshit.

"You selfish, ungrateful child. You had the best childhood money could buy!" she screeches, finally losing her temper. My heart finally releases that piece of hope that I'd held on to for years. The piece of hope that wanted my mother to apologize and try and make things right. When it leaves it just about crushes me but I tuck those emotions away, saving them to let them out later.

"All I wanted was your love. I didn't give a shit about the private school or the clothes or toys. I wanted you to be my mom. That was never in the cards though." I turn to Crax. "Can we go? I've had about as much as I can take of her."

He nods and takes me by the elbow, steering me to the car, as my mother and I stare at each other, something akin to hate in both our gazes. The depth of the bitterness that had grown between us surprised me. We seem fated to hate each other, but that doesn’t stop my curiosity.

When we get to the car I say, "Can you drive us around the corner and park?"

Crax nods but gives me a questioning look. I don't know if I am going to go through with my plan yet though so I keep my mouth shut. The beater starts up with a thundering chugging noise before quieting down as he starts to drive. We go around the block and he pulls over, parallel parking like a pro between two cars I'd be scared to touch because they were so expensive.

"I'm going to follow my mother. I need to do it alone, and I need you to trust me. You can either wait here or I'll find my way back to the store, but I need to find out what's going on," I say, my tone leaving no room for him to object.

That doesn't stop him though. "Just let it go, Alexis. You're better off without her."

"No. Something's going on, my gut is telling me so, and I've learned never to ignore that. Just trust me, Crax, please. I'm not going to run, I wouldn't do that to you, or to myself, so just wait for me, okay?" I plead.

"Fine, go. I'll be here when you're done," he grumbles as though he can't believe he's letting me do this.

I don't wait for him to change his mind. I hop out of the car, jogging down the street to the corner we had turned. My mother was walking so she couldn't have made it that far. I spot her pale blue dress a little ways down the street, heading toward a hotel, by the looks of things, which only makes me more curious.

She glances around furtively before crossing the street and going into a different entrance than the one I had expected. I sprint to catch up with her, moving full tilt down the street. The door that she went in leads to a set of apartments, by the looks of things. I ease it open, hoping that it won't make any noise, and am pleasantly surprised when I'm able to enter quietly.

I race up the stairs as silently as possible and catch her back disappearing into another glass door that looks like it's a hallway through the upper floor of the building. Following her, I get to the door she just went through and see her stop at another door, this one wood, I can tell from the darkness against her skin as she knocks on it.

It opens and she disappears inside. Now comes the boring part.

Waiting for her to leave so I can knock on the same door.

I post up on the other side of the stairs so I can watch through the glass door without being seen. Am I in the way of people coming down from the floor above because of how narrow the stairway is? Yes. Do I care? Not really.

I wait. And wait. And wait some more. In reality it probably isn't that long, but with nothing to do but watch for that door opening it feels like forever. A few people grumble at me as they head down the stairs and have to be careful to get around me. I issue hushed apologies but don't move.

After what feels like hours I hear her voice faintly through the glass door. I hunker down, making sure she can't see me as I wait for her to head back out. Her heels click on the concrete of the stairs as she descends.

I risk a peek over the edge of the stairs and see her carrying her bag, which isn't unusual, but she's clutching it to her chest like it's the most precious thing in the world. Was she doing drugs? She didn't look like she'd had sex, or at least not good sex, so I doubted that was it. Also, I was fairly sure that she wasn't in there long enough for anything satisfying to have taken place. So that left drugs? Had this been going on long? I hadn't noticed anything growing up, but then we never spent much time together.

Once I was sure she was gone I moved out of the stairwell and into the corridor. It stank of old piss and fish with a slight hint of vomit as well. I had thought the stairs themselves were bad enough with the stained concrete that had become mottled after years of abuse, but I suspected that the stairs weren't as bad as the hallway. The carpet is wrinkled and coming away from the walls in places, meanwhile the walls themselves are pock marked from things hitting them and never being repaired.

It felt like my old place before I came back to Sterling City. It had been all I could afford, which meant that if my mother was coming to a place like this then she was desperate for something. Time to find out what.

I knock on the same door she had, but I stand to the side with my back to the wall so whoever is inside can't see me through the peephole, at least not easily. Someone approaches, their footsteps noisy on the floor inside, but they don't open the door. I knock again.

This time the door swings open and the sight that meets my eyes shatters my already bruised heart.

13

Alexis

SMITH STANDS there in the doorway looking at me. Alive. Healthy. Well, for the most part.

"Smith?" I breathe his name as though scared saying it any louder will get rid of this illusion that's standing before me. We buried him. I threw dirt onto his coffin. How the hell was he here?

"Get in before someone sees you," he hisses at me as he grabs my hand and tugs.

I stumble into what looks like his apartment. The place is dingy and depressing. I'm fairly sure that mold is growing on the wall on one side. It's a studio apartment, which doesn't surprise me, but the fact that the bathroom is basically part of the kitchen is a bit much, even for me. Why am I focusing on this stuff? Because my brain can't process the other thing, the fact that Smith is alive.

Smith is fucking alive.

My mind feels like it's trying to open a corrupted file, going through the motions but there's nothing really there. Nothing I understand, anyway. I know I should be grateful that my friend is, evidently, alive, but all I feel is the hot burn of anger and betrayal inside me.

"What are you doing here, Alexis?" Smith asks from behind me.

I turn to face him and I can't stop the tears that spring to my eyes. "I buried you," I whisper.

"Well, as you can see, I'm not dead. If that's all?" He gestures toward the door.

"If that's all? Are you fucking kidding me right now, Smith? Why are you not dead? How are you not dead? I'm not leaving until I get some damn answers and you know how stubborn I can be. Don't make me gold you."

Smith stares at me for a long time, his face blank as he weighs his options. I know he's thinking about all the times I threw a fit and won because he wasn't as stubborn as me. I'm a little hard headed, what can I say?

Finally, he waves at the couch. "Have a seat."

"I'd rather stand," I say, looking at the stained monstrosity. No part of me wants to touch that. It looks like the kind of thing you'd expect cockroaches to nest in.

"Suit yourself," he says as he flops down, immediately picking up his fidget and clicking one of the buttons on the cube, while I wait for the cockroaches to come scurrying out from under him. I'm stressing him out; his fidgets are always a sign that he feels a lot of pressure in that moment. I hate that I'm responsible for him picking up his fidget and clicking it so furiously, but I can't stop now.

"What was my mother doing here?" I ask, trying a different approach.

"Collecting her payment," he mumbles.

"Payment for what?" I ask, realizing that I am going to have to drag every bit of information out of him.

"We made a deal. She pays her necromancer friend to keep me off the radar of the Stiltskin brothers and I count cards for her." Finally, he looks up at me. "Your parents are broke. Apparently, Daddy Dearest has been spending money faster than he can make it and add that to his gambling problem and you can see where they start to come up short."

"What? How the hell did that happen? And a necro, really? You know those guys are freaking crazy."

He looks at me blankly. "I just told you how, and of course I know, but I didn't have a choice."

"It was just a reaction, not a literal question. I understood what you said, Smith."

He nods once before looking back down at his fidget.

"Why didn't you have a choice? Please don't tell me you faked your death to help my parents."

"No, I faked my death so the Stiltskin brothers couldn't collect on my debt. Your mother helped me do it. In return, I gamble and count cards, giving her the winnings, well, most of them."

"So she was here picking up a wad of cash? That's why she was clutching her purse like a life preserver?"

He nods.

"And what would happen if Rumple's boys found out you were alive?" I ask, thinking of Crax waiting for me in the car.

"They'll take my first born child," he says.

It feels like all the air has been sucked out of the room. He made the same deal my mother did? "Why? Why would you give that to Rumple? What could possibly be so important that you sold another human being for it? Also, you don't even have a girlfriend!" My voice escalates as I go and I know that my anger makes him uncomfortable, judging from the furious pace of his clicking, but at this moment I don't care. I want him to feel every bit of my wrath. He was, or is, my best friend. He knew how much that deal hurt me, how it ruined my life.

"You don't know me anymore, Alexis. Things have changed," he says quietly.

"So what now? You're in love? Want to make little Smith babies and raise them in this shit hole?" I snap at him.

He looks up and I see the lost look in his eyes and I know I'm right, about most of it at least. "I am. She's one of the workers at the casino. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen. She makes me... feel."

"Have you actually asked her out?" I ask, wondering how much Smith has really changed. When I knew him he was terrified of speaking to new people.

"Yes, we have been dating for a while now." His shy nature makes this news surprise me.

"Have you brought her back here?" I ask, hoping the answer is no. I can't imagine anyone in their right mind seeing this apartment and wanting to stay with the person that lives in it.

"No, we go to her place. I'm saving up to get somewhere better."

We both fall silent for a moment. After a while I say, "You've broken Parsilla's heart. They all really believe you're dead. I really believed you were dead."

"That is the point, Lex," he replies, using the nickname he gave me as a child, the one that made my mother lose it every time she heard it, saying in that snobby tone of hers, *I didn't name you Lex, I named you Alexis*. The memory almost made me want to smile. Almost. "You can't tell them. I know

the only reason you're still in Sterling City is because of them, otherwise you never would have found out. You have to promise me you won't tell them."

"I won't, not unless it becomes absolutely necessary, but Smith, you have to realize how fucked up this is."

"I know. When they stop collecting debts I'll let my family know I'm still alive, or at least Parsilla."

I pace the room, not knowing where to go from here and not wanting to sit down. Lying to the guys is going to be hard, I know that down to the gold in my magic.

"You can't tell them, Lex. If you do you'll be selling my child to them," Smith says as he watches me move around the room.

"Oh, no, don't put that on me. You did that yourself. It's going to come back to you eventually, you know? It always does, I mean look at me. I was out, on the run and staying in places as shitty as this, but I was free. Now? Now, I'm fucking helping them because it reduced how long they would own me. The only reason they have me at all is because they were waiting for me at *your* funeral, which never needed to happen."

"I'm sorry, Lex. I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"I know that, but that doesn't mean you haven't landed us both in a heaping pile of shit," I say as I pause my pacing in front of him.

"You've changed," he says as he watches me with those eyes that see too much.

"I had no choice. It was change or die or lose my freedom, which I ended up doing anyway, so I guess it was all a waste of time."

"It wasn't. I like the new you. You're bolder, more assertive." He smiles up at me sadly. "Everything's different."

"Truer words have never been spoken," I mutter before adding. "I should get back. Crax is waiting for me, and he will hunt me down if he thinks I've made a run for it, or if he thinks I'm in trouble. He's hard to read, they all are."

"You like them," he says, confusion sounding in his voice.

"What? They are my captors, and Hyde is a certified, grade A asshole. I don't like them." The heat creeping up my spine tells me I'm lying to myself.

"Don't lie, Lex, it doesn't suit you," he says with a grin.

I flip him the bird and walk out.

14

Zard

HYDE and I followed a dozen different leads before we'd found the location of his house. It was at the edge of Sterling City in a neighborhood full of houses that are a little more spread out than in most of the city. Massive, old oak trees separate the houses, giving an even greater sense that we're out in the woods, verses just on the edge of a city.

"You think this is the place?" I wonder aloud.

"If not, I'm going to fucking pay a witch to track this asshole."

"She'll want your blood in exchange."

"Maybe she won't be left alive to ask for it," Hyde says, his voice almost a growl.

I roll my eyes. Hyde acts like such a badass, but he's more bark than bite.

"Let's just hope he comes back home tonight and no one tips him off."

He huffs in response.

I see Crax's name pop up on his phone, and he sets it back down without checking it. "How long are you going to keep punishing him?" The words come out of my mouth before I consider how dumb it is to piss him off while stuck in a small car with him.

Hyde's eyes flash with rage. "I'm not punishing him."

"Like fuck."

"I just don't want to be here."

"None of us want to be here, but that's not where your attitude is. Your attitude is personal, directed at Crax, and you have to let it go."

He leans back in his seat and the fingers on one hand tap the steering wheel. "I don't know what you want me to say."

The slight vulnerability in his voice tells me this is the time to push. "I was there with you, Hyde. I know how bad things got with Rumple after he left. I know how much you protected me, and I appreciate it, more than I can ever say."

"But…"

"But it wasn't Crax's fault."

His eyes squeeze shut and the veins in his neck stick out. I know he wants to yell, but then he lets out a deep breath. "I know."

"Do you?"

"Yeah." The word is harsh.

"You want to let him know, so he doesn't keep your hatred on his back, along with the rest of the world."

He scoffs. "You sound like he's had it so damn hard."

"He didn't have it easy," I say softly.

Neither of us speaks for a long time, and the dark settles around us. I sense some of the tension leave his shoulders.

"I think it would've been easier if we'd come that day..."

He tenses, and I curse myself. Maybe it was the wrong thing to say.

"Do you regret it?" I ask.

He takes a long minute to answer. "I don't know."

The truth was, Rumple had called all of us the day he had died, afraid and begging for our help. And none of us had come. I don't know if they felt the way I did, like Rumple was immortal, like no matter what he said he'd be fine. It was like imagining a childhood monster dying; it just didn't seem possible. Or if, like the other part of me, nothing could've convinced them to face that man again. Come hell or high water.

But when we found out he'd died, we'd come. And so much had been left unsaid.

"Maybe if we'd screamed at him. If we'd called him every name in the book…"

"I wish I would've punched him," Hyde says, his words soft. "I wish I would've shown him what it feels like to have someone more powerful than him beating his flesh raw."

"Would that have taken away your hurt and anger?" I ask, truly curious.

He shakes his head. "I don't know."

I want to ask him more. I want to push for him to forgive Crax. Because the one thing I haven't told my brothers is that I don't want our time together to be over when this is done. We don't need to collect debts like our father, but I think after all my traveling, I've realized that Sterling City is our home. Or, more so, wherever my brothers are is my home.

We have a mountain of wealth in our father's shop. Why couldn't we sell it? Why couldn't we pursue our dreams here together?

Because there's so much left unsaid between us. And I was tired of it. Some things needed to be said. And then… then maybe we could have everything. Maybe even Alexis.

Headlights come down the road behind us. We duck down, and when the lights pass us, we slowly look back up. A black truck pulls into his driveway and the man in question himself steps out. We take a deep breath, exchange a look, and climb out of our car. We're halfway to him when he looks over at us and goes pale.

The big man himself doesn't move. In this moment, he isn't the great hunter that legend has painted him to be. He's just a man. A man who's time is up.

We stop when we get to the bottom of the driveway. The Huntsman isn't someone who will run, but he might be someone who will fight. We stare at him. He's six feet of muscle with a long dark beard and a plaid shirt and jeans. He still looks like a man in his twenties, even though we all know that's impossible.

"It's time," I say, and it hurts to speak the words out loud.

A second later, the passenger door opens. "I guess you aren't helping me out?"

I feel like my heart's in my throat as Snow White herself climbs out of the truck. Snow White, with her paper white skin, her long black hair, and… her massive belly?

Holy shit. She's pregnant. Snow White is pregnant.

The Huntsman looks between her and us. "You won't hurt her."

It's not a question. It's a statement. The Huntsman is an old friend. He knows we're not men who could ever hurt a woman.

She stands fully, seeing us for the first time. Her eyes widen, and she looks between us and her husband. "What's going on?"

"Dear…"

"Who are you?" she asks, and there's a note of fear in her voice.

"We're Rumple's boys, and I'm sorry to tell you, but your husband made a deal with our father."

"No." She presses her knuckles to her mouth and her eyes fill with tears. "That's how you did it? But you said… you said…"

The Huntsman goes to her and takes her other hand. "It's okay. I don't regret a thing."

She sobs when he kisses her hand. Then he gathers her in his arms as she falls apart. Her entire body shudders as she cries, and my own heart twists. When I'd seen his name on the list, I hadn't been happy, but I figured he'd made the deal. He knew what he was doing working with my father.

Now though? Now everything makes sense.

At last, the Huntsman releases her. "Go inside. It'll be done quickly."

She's still crying when he walks toward us and stops a few feet away.

Hyde pulls out a knife.

"Fuck," I mutter.

Hyde's hand shakes ever-so-slightly. "Rumple gave you the queen's heart. In exchange, you promised him yours in ten years."

The Huntsman nods. "And I'm a man who keeps my word."

I don't say that he was also a man who had hidden his location behind a dozen spells, because I don't blame him. If I had the woman of my dreams, and a child on the way, I wouldn't want to die either.

"Wait!" Suddenly, Snow White stands in front of him.

Hyde takes a step back. He's not going to kill a pregnant woman, no matter how badly he wants to be done with this.

She spins to the Huntsman. "What exactly did Rumple say?"

"Honey--"

"What did he say?"

The Huntsman releases a shaky breath. "He said a heart for a heart."

She turns, and there's defiance in her gaze. "He never said it had to be his heart…"

"I won't let anyone else die for me!"

"The pig," she says. "In the backyard."

The man locks eyes with Hyde. "Is that… is that even possible?"

I hold my breath and try to feel the threads of the deal. Would it be satisfied with a pig heart?

"We can try," I hear Hyde say gruffly.

The Huntsman and Snow go into their backyard. We hear some grunting and whining and then a squeal that tears through the quiet night. A little while later, Snow White comes back carrying a little basket. Blood leaks out of the bottom and drips as she walks. The Huntsman walks behind her, his arms soaked in blood, his shirt splattered in it.

She gives the basket to her husband. And then, slowly, he hands it to Hyde.

For a minute the weight of the deal still hangs heavily on us, and my stomach twists at the thought

of having to take his heart, and then the weight vanishes.

"It's done," I say, and find myself smiling.

"It's done?" The Huntsman starts to sag.

His wife is there to hold him up.

"I can't believe… I thought I'd never see my son born."

His wife strokes his beard. "If you ever do something that dumb again, I'm going to poison your food."

To my surprise, he grins. "Just don't make it an apple. You know how I hate those."

They both laugh, and Snow White hugs us both.

We head to our car and they watch us, waving. Hyde puts the basket in the trunk, and then we get in, firing up the engine and tearing down the road.

"You know what the worst thing is?" Hyde's voice is soft. "Rumple would've lied and said it had to be his heart."

A chill rolls down my spine and my relief at leaving our old friend alive is gone. Hyde is right. Our father may have created a deal with a loophole, but he knew the Huntsman's pride wouldn't have allowed him to back out of it, and Rumple wouldn't point it out. A good man would've died for nothing.

"I'm glad he's dead."

"That's something we can agree on," Hyde whispers, then turns up the radio in an attempt to drown out the memory of our father.

It doesn't work.

15

Alexis

Crax and I stop at a store and buy cleaning products and new light bulbs before getting to work on Rumple's sick little shop. At first, the whole damned place feels like the storage shed of some mass murderer. But after putting in more lights and brightening the dreary space, and cleaning off the layers of dirt, the place isn't nearly as bad.

And then there's Crax. Every time I look at him, I can't help but smile. He took off that suit of his and put on a white shirt and basketball shorts. He has a bucket full of soapy water and a rag that he's been using to clean off the filthy surfaces. It shouldn't be cute, but it freaking is. Has there ever been anything sexier than a hot man cleaning?

Lordy, I don't think so. My lady bits are enjoying every bit of watching him clean.

He looks at me. "How's the inventorying going?"

I jerk, looking back down at the clipboard and paper. He put me in charge of inventorying everything in the store, and even though I'd written a ton down, I'd barely made a dent in the surface of the place. "Okay, I guess."

"Then why do you keep grinning?"

I hate that I feel my cheeks heat. Had he really noticed? Then he must have noticed me checking him out. "You're more observant than you seem."

He smiles. "Yeah, that was one good thing Rumple taught me."

For some reason, I find myself curious about what life was like with the man who had bought an unborn child. "How did he teach you to be observant?"

His humor fades. "As a boy, he'd have me watch people. He wanted me to find people who seemed sad, more than sad, desperate, and then he'd see if he could make a deal with them. If I chose right, we got ice cream. If I chose wrong, we went to bed with no dinner. I learned pretty fast."

"Okay," I say slowly. "I know I'm not supposed to feel bad for my captors, but I kind of think being sold to you guys might be better than being his kids."

He lifts a brow. "Don't kind of think it, know it. Rumple was a worse father than a debt collector, and that's saying something."

I laugh, and he smiles, going back to cleaning.

"So, what's up with Hyde and you?" Now, I know I'm being nosy, but I can't help it. "There

seems to be a lot of anger there. He's actually kind of a jerk."

Crax pauses in his cleaning, before continuing again, his movements faster. "It's not his fault. It's mine. Hyde deserves to be mad at me. Hell, he deserves to hate me."

"You? Come on… I mean, you're not exactly unlikable."

I thought he would laugh, but instead he just keeps scrubbing the gunk and dust from the shelf like it did him wrong in another life. "I'm not a good guy," Crax finally says.

"I doubt that."

He finally stops cleaning, dunking the rag back into the bucket and cleaning it carefully. "I had a choice, and I made the wrong one. I thought I could get a good job and support my brothers, get them out of that situation. But as soon as I made enough to support them, badly, but to get them out of there, they were already gone. And they hated me."

"There's nothing wrong with getting yourself out of a bad situation," I tell him, and mean it.

He rings the rag out. "Just… trust me… I deserve whatever he throws at me."

I open my mouth to say more, but a little bell jingles over the door. We look up to find Hyde storming in and Zard coming slowly after, carrying eight boxes of pizza. Instantly, I sense Crax tense. Hyde's anger and Crax's self-loathing seems to fill the air until I can't take it.

"Yay, pizza! But did you get some for yourselves too?"

Zard grins. "We kind of thought we compensated for your ridiculous appetite."

"Depends what kind you got…"

"Meat lovers."

"Eight fucking boxes of the same thing?" I leap off of the countertop and set down the inventory list, ready to fight them.

"Well, and some pepperoni and cheese."

I glare at Zard. "The good pepperoni?"

His grin widens. "Yeah, but that's for me."

I advance on him. "I'll fight you for it."

"I think I'd like that," he tells me, giving me a wink.

Hyde speaks from behind me. "Should a prisoner even get pizza? Don't we have crackers or anything?"

"Ass," I mutter, but we all head upstairs.

Zard speaks from behind me. "Speaking of asses…"

I look back at him, and see him staring blatantly at my ass. "Enjoying the view?"

"*Mm. Mm*," he says, then winks at me.

I look forward, catching myself before I stumble up the stairs.

Behind me, his rich laugh comes, vibrating through my very soul. And as much as I want to get all stabby with him for threatening my food, I can't help but soak in the sound. Traveling constantly has been fun in some ways. I never see the same place twice. I never get bored of my surroundings. But at the same time, it's pretty hard to make friends.

Here, in this house with them, I can almost imagine what it'd feel like to have real friends or a real family. And I kind of like it.

When we reach the apartment, Zard sets the pizza on the counter. Next to it, Hyde puts a basket. I frown as I stare at the white countertop. "What's dripping from the basket?"

"Blood," Hyde says.

"Blood?"

"Actually, a heart." He's looking at me, his eyes piercing, as if he's evaluating my response.

“Whose heart?”

For a second I can’t tear my eyes from his. This whole time I’ve managed to convince myself that by working with them I’m just shortening my sentence, that I’m gaining my freedom. But in this moment, it kind of feels like I traded my life for my soul.

And it feels wrong.

“Whose heart?” I ask again.

Hyde grins. “An innocent, princess.”

16

Hyde

Watching Alexis's fury build as I spoke was a turn on, I couldn't deny that. I knew Crax and Zard were both giving her puppy dog eyes whenever she wasn't looking though, so I wasn't about to feed her ego. She had them by the short and curlies, if only she realized. That shit was not going to fly with me.

"You killed an innocent person as part of a deal?" she asks incredulously, her anger staining her cheeks a lovely shade of red as her chest starts to heave, either from her anger, as I suspect, or from fear of me and my lack of limits. I push the idea that she's scared of me away, focusing instead on another set of cheeks I wanted to redden with the palm of my hand, but that's getting ahead of myself.

"It was a pig, and neither of us killed it," Zard says, ruining my fun.

She deflates a little. "A pig?"

I nod.

"You really are an asshole, you know that?" she spits the words at me as though they're weapons.

"Princess, you have no idea." I chuckle and load a plate up with some slices of pizza. When I look up, her eyes are wide as she stares at the mountain of cheesy goodness on my plate. I can't help it; I lean in close as I whisper, "My appetite for food isn't the only thing that's insatiable."

As I move away I see her cheeks pinken once again, but this time I know it's not anger. It's lust. Fuck, my cock rages to life at the thought of having her at my mercy. Whenever I'd said it before it was always some kind of torture I'd planned on, nothing hardcore, just enough to make her not want to risk running again.

Now?

I'm the one being tortured by the tight tank top and booty shorts she's wearing. Her legs look long and lean and like they should be wrapped around my waist or my head, and her perky breasts are a little more than a handful, which is perfect. Something to grab on to while I fuck her brains out.

Ugh. I shove half a slice of pizza in my mouth. Where has my anger and rage gone? This girl had made us chase her and now she's here, living in our family apartment, eating our food, using our stuff, and what did we have to show for it? What the hell had Rumple been thinking, making a deal for a human life? In all reality, he'd probably just been trying to go after the thing that would hurt her mom the most when she made the deal. What he didn't realize was that her mom didn't give two shits about her, and now we are the ones stuck with a person who depends on us.

I can't stop myself from glancing at her occasionally while she eats her pizza and watches some random TV show that Zard apparently finds hilarious with us. She smiles every once in a while, but

when I actually watch, her eyes are on my younger brother, not the TV. She is just as soft for him as he is hard for her. And I know we're all struggling with our attraction to her.

We're all fucked.

Some part of me wonders if Rumple knew this would happen. Had he been able to foresee that we would need her? That she would tame each of us in ways I hadn't predicted? I knew his magic was more than ours, in so many ways, but had foresight been one of those closely guarded skills that made him so mysterious, even to his sons?

I push the thought away, something I seem to be doing a lot recently, but I hate thinking about that monster and he's been on my mind more than ever since we brought Alexis home. I tried refusing to think of this place as our home, but it wasn't worth it. This was where we had grown up. Sterling City. This store. All of it was home. It had taken Alexis's arrival for me to realize that. Now I just have to accept it.

When Alexis excuses herself and goes to bed for the night I realize how long the four of us have been sitting there, just being with each other. I'd been too lost in my own thoughts to pay attention to time. Now that she's out of the room I feel like I can take a deeper breath, as though when she'd been in here with us she'd taken up more than her share of oxygen.

I know it's just my idiot self letting her get to me though.

"She's going to destroy us if we're not careful," Crax says as he takes a swig from a bottle of beer that I hadn't even noticed him get.

I am off my game to say the least, so I just mumble my agreement. My mind slips back to the talk Zard had with me in the car as I look at my older brother. I had idolized him as a kid, wanted what he had, and when he left I was happy at first since I thought it would mean that I got more of our father's attention, and I was right, just not in the way I wanted.

A shudder rippled through me at the memory of my first beating. It was the day after Crax had called to say he wasn't coming home, that he was going to be a college student. At first Rumple had been calm, seemed to accept the news with grace. Little did I know the storm was brewing inside him. The rain of fists and slaps and kicks came later.

He apologized to me after the first time. I think seeing the bruises and cuts on his son's face had surprised him. It happened again though, and again and again, until I lost track of how often he unleashed his anger on me. He learned to only mark me where my clothes would hide it and moved on from using his hands and feet to using his belt or whatever was within easy reach.

Just the thought of Alexis seeing some of the scars covering my body made me want to walk out of the room and never come back. I don't though. Instead, I say, "I'm sorry."

Crax and Zard both turn to look at me.

"What?" Crax asks while Zard nods me on, clearly knowing where I'm going before I do.

"I'm, uh, sorry, you know, for being such an ass to you. You did what you needed to do and got out. You couldn't have predicted how Rumple would react."

Crax's jaw literally drops open as he stares at me.

"Or maybe I'm not if this is how you're going to react," I say, pushing to my feet to go and clean up the pizza.

"Sorry," Crax says finally as my back turns to him.

"Don't worry about it," I mutter as I put my plate in the sink, rinsing the remains of my pizza massacre from the scene of the crime.

"Hyde, stop for a minute, please," Crax says, and his voice is closer than before.

I feel his hand on my shoulder and turn to face him. "Look," I begin as he wraps me in a hug. A

bro hug where he pats me hard on the back, but still, a hug, and for the life of me I can't remember the last time someone voluntarily hugged me. I pat him on the back as well and we separate after a couple of moments.

"If I'd known--" Crax begins but I cut him off, raising my hand in the air.

"I don't want to talk about this. I just wanted to say sorry, you didn't deserve my anger."

"Can I ask why now?" Crax raises an eyebrow.

"Our little brother is very wise." It was all I said before I left the kitchen area and retreated to my room. They both let me go in silence, knowing that I'd said as much as I was going to say tonight and I appreciated it.

When I get to my room, I strip down to just my boxer briefs and look at myself in the mirror. It's something I do every once in a while. I feel like it's important to remember what happened and what I survived, so I stare at the scars that cover my body. They aren't terrible, not like some I've seen, but they were caused by my father and that is what hurts the most.

My fingers trace some of the longer lines and the anger I wondered about earlier comes rushing back with a vengeance. It's not directed at anyone in particular now, though. Whatever grudge I'd been holding against Crax is finally gone. Why? I wasn't sure, but I knew that it would be better for us with it no longer hanging over our family. Now, I just need to shower the scent of the pizzeria off and I'll be back to normal, well, as normal as I can be. But first, a nightcap was in order. With all this talk of our father, if I didn’t have a few drinks then I’d be having nightmares, and no one wanted to hear me screaming in my sleep. No one wanted to deal with that kind of trauma, least of all me.

17

Alexis

I'd excused myself to go to bed in hopes that it would make them go to bed earlier as well, but as I sat and listened in my room I could still hear the TV going and low conversation drifting up the stairs. I couldn't even remember what we'd been binge-watching, all I knew was that Zard loved it and his laugh was one of the few things in life that I enjoyed anymore so I wasn't about to do something to stop him from enjoying himself. That being said, I wish they would hurry up and go to bed.

Something I'd been thinking about ever since I found out Smith was alive was why he'd made a deal with Rumple. He knew, *he knew*, what a shit idea that was, but he did it anyway, so now the question was why?

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, they go to bed. I'm trying to wait, to make sure that none of them are awake and able to disturb me, so I picture them getting ready for bed. Which leads to me imagining them naked, which is not a good idea. I know they must all look damn good, given how good they looked with clothes on, but that won't get me any closer to answers.

Instead, I start singing softly to myself to pass the time, knowing all the words to a few songs lets me figure out how long I've been waiting since the average song is about three minutes in length. Why am I doing this and not just using my phone? Because I left it downstairs. I thought it was a smart move at the time, leaving what I would need where I would need it, but my dumb ass didn't think about a situation like this.

Finally, when I've covered most of the songs I know by heart, I ease my door open and creep downstairs, not just to the living area either, but all the way down to the shop. My phone is still by the area I'd been cleaning earlier. I swipe across the screen to turn on the flashlight function and head over to the counter where the register is, the one that blocks the door Crax had opened with a code when we needed to deposit Lady White's voice.

The numbers are worn on the keypad so I know which have been pressed repeatedly, but I don't know the order. I hadn't been able to see it when Crax typed it in before. I try a few combinations, sequentially increasing numbers, then decreasing numbers, then repetitive numbers. Each time I'm met by a red blinking light.

I sigh and turn back to the counter, looking through all the paperwork that is laying around, the dust rising into the air and ticking my nose. The urge to sneeze is strong but I pinch my nostrils closed and breathe through my mouth, willing the feeling away. Someone had told me once that saying the names of fruits made you not sneeze, so I start mumbling. "Banana, pineapple, strawberry." I pause

and the urge is still there so I pinch and go back to naming fruits. "Watermelon, apple, orange,--"

"Grapefruit," a male voice says behind me. It sounds sleepy so I don't recognize that it's Crax until I turn around and see him standing there in his boxers, his hair already mussed from sleep. He raises an eyebrow at me in question. "Why are you down here naming fruit in the middle of the night?"

"I was looking for my phone," I lie smoothly.

Which only makes him raise his eyebrow again. "You mean the one in your hand with the flashlight on?"

"Yep. Left it down here when I got distracted by pizza, needed to use the flashlight to see."

"And I suppose the alert I received on my phone that someone was trying to break into the vault was just a coincidence?" he asks as he approaches me, crowding my space and making my mind go blank of anything except him. The pine and musk scent of him that invades my nostrils seems to have a direct connection to my core as I ache with need. I am in trouble though, judging by the expression on his face. "Are you going to tell me what you were doing?"

Fuck. I hadn't even thought anything like that would be possible with how rundown this place is. I can't imagine it being Rumple's doing so I know it must be something Crax did himself. Which means that there's not an easy way out of this. If it was installed by a company or something I could maybe claim that they had fucked up and sent him an incorrect notification, but if he'd installed it and created it himself, which seems like a very Crax thing to do, then I wouldn't be able to get away with my lie, or rather lies.

"Fine. You caught me. I was trying to find out what Smith died for. What he'd offered Rumple and what he'd needed so badly to make a deal with your monster of a father," I say, all of which is true. Theoretically, Smith had died since there had been a body. The fact that he was either alive once more or had never been completely dead was irrelevant to the current conversation.

"Why didn't you just ask?" he responds, sounding hurt.

"You guys get weird about the family business sometimes, so I thought I'd investigate myself. That way I wouldn't fuck up the good thing we've had going lately."

"Is this because you saw your mother earlier?" he asks, his tone softening.

"Partly," I reply carefully.

"All you had to do was ask," he says quietly. "We're weird about it because we still expect our father to pop up from around the corner, and Hyde still expects to get a beating from him for breaking the rules. I think we only started really believing he was dead and not coming back when you poured that sauce on the couch."

I chuckle, still proud of that moment and also still mourning the loss of sauce.

"I'll show you the ledger. Just try to keep from looking at every page; it will break your heart," he says as he types in the code, hiding it from my prying eyes.

The thick door swings open silently and I follow Crax in, the glowing bottles reminding me that each one contains something precious, just like Lady White's voice. We travel down the center of the narrow room and eventually come to a stop at the other end, my heart already breaking just from the sheer number of bottles that had been collected.

When Crax moves to one side I see the pedestal with the ledger resting atop it. The book is thicker than an encyclopedia and twice as wide. My stomach churns at the thought of what it contains. I lose my nerve. "Can you find the entry for me?" I ask, looking up at Crax and seeing the sorrow I feel welling in my chest on his own face.

"Of course," he says without batting an eyelid as his hands smooth over the cover, which is made of rich, mahogany-colored leather with gold leafing. It looks like something that should be in a rare

book shop instead of being used as a ledger for people's hopes and dreams.

The book creaks as he opens it, the leather protesting the disuse. His fingers skim lightly over the pages as he looks for what I assume is Smith's name. I glance over his arm at the other pages and see that some lines of the chicken scratch handwriting have been grayed out, like someone took a highlighter to it, but instead of yellow it's more of a mucky brownish-gray color.

"What are those?" I ask, pointing at the discolored lines.

"Collected debts," Crax answers shortly before going back to looking for Smith's deal.

I don't know if the thing is in any kind of order, but after a few minutes I start to get bored and begin looking at the bottles. Some just glow different colors, others glow with actual objects inside them. One contains a fairy's wings, another ogre tusks, one is just a jar of dirt which is weird, but whatever. Who was I to judge what was precious to someone? My eyes travel along the rows upon rows of jars, some with scales, some with dust, some with fangs, each one containing something that meant the world to someone else and Rumple took it.

The sorrow that had been welling up in my chest started to threaten to overflow. I unceremoniously slump to the floor and just huddle there where I can't see any of the jars, can't see anything except Crax's feet, and then suddenly his eyes as he drops down in front of me.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Why do people give these things up if they’re so precious? I can't imagine parting with something so important," I say, my voice hushed as though I don't want to offend the items in the jars.

"That's because you're not the same kind of person as they are. Whatever happened to them made them think they had no choice, that to get what they want they had to make a deal with the devil, also known as my father," Crax says, trying to make me laugh.

"Sometimes I just don't understand people," I say as tears pool on my eyelid. I refuse to cry enough for them to fall though.

Without hesitating, Crax leans forward and wraps his arms around me, pulling me close. For a moment I don't react, but then I wrap my arms around his neck and breathe deeply, trying to memorize his scent, the feel of him in my arms, the rhythm of his heart that I can feel thudding against my own.

"I thought you might have changed enough that your beautiful heart had hardened, but you haven't at all, have you? You suck it up and do what's necessary but you're still a big softie, just like the first time we met." He sounds relieved, which is funny since I don't think of myself as what he just described.

"You haven't either," I say quietly. "You're still taking the world's problems on your shoulders, just like you were before."

"We do what we have to do," he says as he pulls back from me, just enough that I can look him in the eye, those stunning gold eyes of his.

There's a moment between us, as though the air itself is being pulled taut, and all I can do is wait with bated breath. His thumb strokes over my cheek and I lean in, relishing his touch. My eyes flutter closed, which causes a single tear to roll down my cheek.

I freeze, hoping he doesn't notice, but I should know better. Crax leans in and kisses the tear from my cheek. His lips are soft and firm against my skin. He doesn't stop at the tear though; he kisses his way down to the corner of my mouth before claiming my lips. The way he touches me is masterful, and as we kiss I feel myself turn to jelly in his arms. I pull myself closer to him, trying to savor this moment, because I'm sure it won't happen again.

When he pulls away, breaking the kiss, I know that he has control of himself once more, and my heart sinks a little.

"Alexis," he groans my name as though it causes him physical pain. "I've been thinking about doing that ever since I saw you again. I don't want you to think I'm taking advantage of our... agreement though."

"I don't," I breathe, and lean in to kiss him once more.

He pulls back. "Also I found Smith. That's what I was about to tell you when you dropped to the floor."

"Show me?" I ask.

Crax pushes to his feet, holding me against him still. He might be verbally saying that he doesn't want to do this because of his high ethical standards, but his body is saying something completely different. Gently, he lets me down, my body sliding over his as my feet touch the floor. I feel every inch of him through the thin fabric of his boxers, and it takes my breath away. I'd thought cocks like that were fairy tales that girls tell one another to give themselves hope after a bad lover.

He points to the book and I do my best to pull my thoughts away from his cock. "Smith sold his firstborn so that he could clear all debts of one Skye Matthis. It also stipulates that some form of magic was to surround her to prevent her from ever getting herself into debt of that kind again."

"He did this for someone else?" I murmur. My heart breaks all over again. I'd assumed the worst of my best friend, and he'd let me.

"Looks that way," Crax says, his professional demeanor slipping back into place. "It's unusual, but it does happen sometimes."

"But the magic forces you to collect?" I ask.

"Unfortunately. If we don't, then we will be in pain, as will the debtor after a while. It's almost like a compulsion. If we neglect it then it only gets worse until it's all-consuming, for both parties," he says, sounding like he has experience, which makes me wonder how quickly after their father's death they decided to start collecting his debts.

"I see I found the party." Hyde's voice comes from the other end of the room. "And what might you two be doing in the vault at this time of night with Crax just in his undies?"

Heat flares in my cheeks at his suggestive tone. Even if I had just been kissing Crax, that didn't mean I wanted someone calling attention to it, or to the fact that I would have happily gone back to his bed with him. "I was showing Alexis the ledger," Crax says coolly.

"Oh, is that what we're calling it nowadays? I've got a ledger you might want to look at as well, sweet girl," Hyde says as he waggles his eyebrows. Is he drunk? When did that happen?

"You should get to bed, brother. I think your beers have finally caught up with you," Crax says.

"I'll go to bed... if you two come with me, eh? Eh?"

I'm not sure what to make of this Hyde but I kind of like it. He stumbles into the vault a little further, his hand reaching out to catch himself, rattling the jars on the shelf in a way that makes me nervous. What happens if a jar breaks?

I pause for a moment, glancing up at Crax with what I hope is pleading in my eyes as I say, "I'll take you to bed, might even strip you naked, but I'm not staying."

"Boo! Where's the fun in that? One of these days I'm going to spank that perfect ass of yours until it's as red as the blush on your cheeks, then you'll be begging me to fuck you... You'll see!" His speech is slurred and he hiccups at the end.

Nothing good comes from a drunk person hiccuping.

As soon as the thought crosses my mind he turns and grabs the trash can under the register, vomiting until he has nothing left. Crax leaves him to it for a while as he says to me quietly, "We had a chat about dear old dad tonight, which I think may have stirred up some memories."

I nod in understanding. Alcohol is a good distraction, for a time, but there's always a price to pay, just like with magic.

When Hyde heaves again but nothing comes out, Crax launches into action, ready to help his brother now that the danger of him getting vomited on has passed. I help him get Hyde upstairs and into his bed, seeing his room for the first time, and yet not seeing it because all the lights are out. I'm curious about the middle brother, always have been. Crax and Zard I understood, but Hyde, even after spending this time with him, is still a mystery, one that smelled of pizza, beer, and vomit.

18

Crax

SITTING beside my brother's bed, I stare down at him, and my heart aches. Even in sleep, he looks so broken. So miserable and alone. It's almost unbearable that my actions led him to become this man.

It was the last thing I wanted.

I would've made a deal with Rumple himself to stop this from happening.

How fucked up was that? After everything I knew about my father's magic, I still would've done it. I would've done anything for Hyde.

The past comes back to me like a knife twisting in my gut. When we were boys, I'd tell Hyde stories to help him fall asleep at night. I'd make him "magical" spells to keep the monsters he feared away. He just always seemed so young and so perfect, and I felt like it was my job to keep him that way.

To be father's perfect successor and to protect my brothers. That's all I knew.

Even though I was only three years older than Hyde, I'd threaten bullies that bothered him. I'd meet him outside of his classroom and walk him home. I'd save my allowance to buy him and Zard the kinds of foods my dad never wanted us to have, like ice cream, and we'd sit outside the ice cream shop around the corner laughing and talking.

Then, I was Hyde's hero. Then, I could take away all of his problems.

Now though, I seemed to only make them worse. Just apologizing to me had sent him into a downward spiral, and I only had myself to blame.

And our father. Our fucking horrible father.

I brush his blond hair out of his eyes and pull his blankets up higher, tucking him in the way I did when we were children. Going to the kitchen, I grab two Advils and a bottle of water, then set them beside his bed before dragging a small trash can over. I want to stay with him all night and make sure he doesn't need anything, but I'm a coward, because I don't. I don't want to deal with the ramifications of doing such a thing. Of risking Hyde's wrath in the morning.

When I rise from sitting beside him on the bed, my knees are shaking, and I feel sick. Not just because of having to come face-to-face with how I hurt my brother, but because I'd thought of a way to help him. And if I didn't act now, I might never.

I spot Alexis still standing quietly near the doorway. "Go to sleep," I tell her softly as I pass.

She frowns, and I don't wait to see if she obeys. Instead, I walk across the house to the other side of the living room. To the hall we never go down. This side of the house only has two things: Rumple's room and his office.

My hand closes around the handle to his door, and I'm surprised when it turns without triggering a lock. Then, pushing it open, I take a deep breath and turn on the light.

The ground shifts under my feet. I'd known what to expect from the police report, but knowing it and seeing it were two completely different things. This was his room. The place I'd only entered a couple times in my childhood. Everything in the room was a display of wealth, all in pristine white.

All except the massive bloodstain in the center of the room, and the blood splattered in all directions around it.

I hear someone gasp behind me. I don't need to turn to see who it is.

"What happened?" she asks, and there's fear in her question.

I know my voice sounds numb as I say the words for the first time out loud, "Rumple was murdered here. Pretty violently, I heard. The police said they suspected several people had done it. Slowly. Based on how they found the… how they found the body parts."

I clench my fists and squeeze my eyes shut.

"Crax," she whispers my name and sets a hand on my shoulder.

"He was a bastard," I say, the words breathless.

"I know."

"He hurt Hyde."

"I know."

"He made our lives miserable."

"I know."

"But… but… he was still our father."

"I know," she says, and there are tears in the words.

I rub my eyes before the moisture can fall, then open them and move forward. Without looking at Alexis, I start to pull the pictures down from the walls, before placing them on the bed. I expect her to ask me what I'm doing. And I know that it's impossible for me to explain that I need to clean this place of him. I need to destroy the ghosts so they can't keep destroying all of us.

But before I can, she asks, "Knick knacks on the bed too?"

"Yes," I say, trying not to sound surprised.

Even though it's late, even though it's been a long day, we work together. We clear the room of everything, and then I drag things down to the dumpster and throw them away. When there's nothing but furniture, I go down to the vault of glowing bottles and select two.

Alexis watches me closely as I smash one onto the floor and speak the words. Instantly, all the furniture is gone. The bed he slept on. The big chairs by the windows. Even the little tables.

Before she can ask me what the other bottle is for, I take it to the bloodstain and smash it there before speaking the words. Instantly, all traces of the broken bottles, the spells, and the blood are gone.

And then, I'm standing in an empty room, breathing hard.

She's beside me an instant later.

"Sometimes people sell spells. Usually, they don't trade for anything too terrible," I tell her.

She nods. "So what are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to take a shower. And tomorrow... tomorrow I'm going to spend my father's money for the first time. I'm going to remove everything in this place that reminds us of him, and I'm going to

make it a home."

"Why?" she asks, but there's no judgment in her voice.

And I finally admit it out loud. "Because when we're done collecting debts, I want my brothers to stay. I want us to be a family again, a different, better family."

It feels good to say it out loud. I only wish I could say more. That maybe if we aren't so fucked up by my father's memory, maybe Alexis will want to stay too when it's all done.

An instant later, she hugs me, and I sink against her. Breathing in that sweet scent that's all Alexis. The same scent she had years ago, a teasing perfume of sweet flowers.

I draw back from her, and our eyes lock. "I'm sorry about before. About trying to kidnap you." And I don't have to specify that I'm talking about the first time, because both of us know it.

Part of me expected her to laugh at my pathetic apology. Instead, something vulnerable washes over her face. "Our lunch together, that kiss, was it all part of the plan?"

It feels like I've been punched in the gut. Did she really think that all these years? "No, Alexis. None of that was part of the plan. That was… that was… the best fuck up of my life. I was trying to prove to Rumple that I could do this job without him, but when you made me feel... *everything*, I realized what I'd always ignored. I couldn't do this job, with or without you."

Her face is unreadable. "Did you let me go by accident or on purpose?"

I stare at her. "I was never really sure."

We'd found her at that motel in the middle of nowhere. I'd joined her for dinner, and a simple plan to distract her had turned into hours of talking. By the time we'd walked outside, I'd decided to let her go. We'd walked around the side of the building, and she'd stopped. I'd wanted to tell her that she had to go. That she had to run. But somehow, we'd kissed instead. An earth shattering kiss that had made me feel like she was the one for me.

And then Hyde and Zard had come up behind her. She'd struggled, and they'd stuffed her into the back of the car. They'd gone to take her things out of her hotel room, pack her car, and make it look like she'd left, so there wouldn't be questions. Hyde was going to drive her car home after he'd checked out.

I was supposed to be guarding Alexis. But I'd turned my back on her. I never knew how she got out of her cuffs, or what the hell she'd hit me on the back of the head with. But when my brothers had woken me, she and her car were gone.

We never saw her again.

Sure, we chased her. We came close, especially when Hyde took the brunt of her gold magic one night, but we hadn't succeeded. It became like a game to Hyde. Zard had begun to admire her. Not just because of her beauty, but because of her cleverness.

And then we'd gone back home.

And I'd never forgotten her.

Alexis strokes my face, bringing me back to the present. "I'm going to be free of you guys."

"I know," I tell her, and it hurts to say.

"But tonight, I want a shower."

I nod, but before I can answer, she adds, "With you."

With me? The words echo through my mind.

We turn off the light and close the door on the room that's no longer Rumple's. We pause outside Hyde's room and make sure he's still sleeping, and then she pushes open my door.

Maybe I should tell her no. Maybe I should remind her that things are still a mess between us.

But something must be wrong with me because I don't do any of those things. I just let her lead me

to something I couldn’t possibly deserve.

19

Alexis

My heart races as I turn on the shower and look back at Crax. He's watching me, but I can't tell for the life of me what he's thinking. But one thing I do know is that I've never seen Crax like this before. Hell, I never even pictured him like this before.

The man I'd met in that diner had been sweet and smiled easily, even though there was uncertainty behind his eyes. The man he'd grown into made sense to me. A man in a suit with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

But this man? The one who worked in nothing but his boxers, scrubbing a room clean of his father to ease the pain for his brothers, he was someone else. Someone as broken and vulnerable as I was. Someone with shitty parents. Someone who tried to be better than they made him.

I needed this man.

Moving closer to him, I place my hands on his cheeks and stroke the slight stubble that's begun to grow. His expression changes, and for the first time since he saw Hyde, I swear I feel his walls crashing down. He looks at me like the world wouldn't turn without me. Like he wants to hold onto me as much as I want to hold onto him.

He leans closer, and then we're kissing. Our kiss is soft at first, but it slowly grows more desperate as the room fills with steam. His hands stroke up and down my arms before finally coming to rest at my hips. When he pulls me against him, I gasp. He's hard and ready, all for me, and the knowledge turns me on.

I break from our kiss, breathing hard and clinging to him. For a minute we just stand together, trying to catch our breath. I sense in him that he's waiting, waiting for any sign that I might stop this. That he'll have to pull away.

"This is happening," I say, a shudder rolling down my spine.

"Alexis," he murmurs my name, then lightly kisses his way down my neck as goosebumps rise on my flesh.

His hand slides up and tugs at my shirt, but he doesn't remove it. And hell, I should've known he was the kind of man to wait for permission, even if he drives me crazy. I grab the bottom of my shirt and lift it off, forcing us to break apart for a moment.

He groans when my shirt hits the floor, and then his hands are on my breasts. I breathe him in as he

cups me, his touch tender but firm. His thumbs find my nipples and stroke them slowly, making them hard and achy.

Without thinking, I draw off his boxers, and gasping for air, I let my gaze roam his naked body. And holy hell, I'm not disappointed. Crax, Mr. Suit, is packing a delicious cock, the likes of which I've never seen before. I reach for him like a favorite treat and wrap one of my hands around his length, drawing a groan from his lips.

As he continues to touch my breasts, we begin to kiss again. Harder and more desperate than before, our tongues tangling, and my hand stroking him in rhythm with our feverish kisses. Slowly, Crax begins to thrust into my hand, and a silent thrill rolls through my body when I feel his length wet with his precum.

He makes a strangled sound and breaks our kiss. "Shower or against the wall. Decide fast."

I can't even laugh, I'm too damned turned on. Instead, I slip off my shorts and move back until I'm in the big walk-in shower. He comes in after me like a man in a spell. The hot spray against my skin shocks me for a minute before he spins me around, pressing my back against the wall.

He grabs my upper thighs and pulls me up. Instinctually, I wrap my legs around his back. But instead of sliding into me, he slips a hand between us, and we start to kiss again.

My head spins when he parts me and slips a finger into my center, stroking the folds with a teasing motion that makes the world go black. I toss my head back, breaking our kiss, and ride him as he slides two fingers inside of me.

I'm losing my mind when he begins to suck my nipples, and I don't know if it's the heat of the water, the coolness of the air, or the magic of this man, but I feel like my body is alive for the first time. It buzzes with desire. Every nerve a live wire whispering of danger.

His hand finally pulls away.

"Please, Crax," I whisper.

I don't need to say more. His massive cock presses between my lower lips, and he slowly eases into me. My nails dig into his shoulders, and I'm sure I'm screaming his name. But he doesn't stop until he comes to his hilt.

Then he gives me one minute to suck in breaths before he pulls out and plunges right back in.

"Fuck!" I scream.

But he doesn't stop. Sweet Crax is gone. The man left behind thrusts in and out of me as I ride him. He moves from one nipple to the other like he owns them, until I can't take it anymore. My orgasm hits me like a wave, and then I lose my mind. I ride him like I'm desperate for this release, and his mouth leaves my breasts. He breathes my name, then fucks me harder until I feel a shudder roll through his body, and he comes too.

Time stops as we hold each other, the steam rising all around us. A perfect moment of pure pleasure. Of closeness.

I didn't have any expectations that night. But when Crax takes me to his bed and fucks me three more times, it's more than I could have wanted. It's more than I could've ever hoped.

And when we fall asleep tangled together, I don't feel an ounce of guilt. I've had a thousand moments of loneliness and pain, and so has Crax. We deserve this.

Even if tomorrow, nothing has really changed.

20

Zard

LAST NIGHT HAD BEEN unexpected in many ways. The first was Hyde actually taking my advice and working on letting go of his anger, or at least not aiming it at Crax. The second was Crax and Alexis fucking like wild animals for most of the night.

I hadn't thought he would be the one she chose, and as much as I hate to admit it, it hurt. The fact that I've come to feel so much for Alexis in such a short period of time is a testament to the amazing woman that she was and has become. She's allowed to be with whoever she wants, of course, I just wish it'd been me.

The noises that came out of Crax's room were enough to have me hard as a rock all night, even for hours after they'd finally stopped. A weird part of me was proud of my uptight brother for going with it, because knowing him, his head would have been a battle ground making that decision, and for his staying power, because I wasn't sure if I would have been able to last as long with that sweet ass in my hands.

As it was, I had to take a cold shower at three in the morning. Even with the icy water aimed directly at my cock, I couldn't get the echoes of Alexis's pleasure out of my head. I'd finally given in and gotten myself off in the shower, picturing her on her hands and knees in front of me, that ass in the air calling to me like a siren's song, but that wasn't enough; I was hard again only a few minutes later. It was only after my fourth lonely orgasm that my cock finally accepted that it wasn't going to be inside a pussy anytime soon. Or at least not the pussy I want.

I came down to make breakfast early since I hadn't been able to sleep much. Well, I never really slept much anyway, but last night had been particularly bad. I'm done with the bacon and eggs and am moving on to pancakes when Alexis pads into the kitchen wearing nothing but an oversized t-shirt. One that had to be Crax's, though I don't remember ever seeing it before. The front is splashed with neon colors and reads 'Run for Justice 5k'. Definitely Crax's. None of the rest of us would run unless forced. Donate money? Sure. Happy to. But running? If I'm doing that then someone's chasing me.

Her golden hair is mussed up, the long weight of it tangling around her shoulders and curling around the edge of her breasts in a way that makes my dick hard once more. I have to suppress a groan. It almost feels like I'd been permanently at least at half mast since our kiss took place a foot away from where I am standing now.

"Good night?" I say before I can stop myself.

Red flares on her cheeks and I feel like an asshole. "You heard me, huh?" she asks, letting a chunk of her blonde hair slip free from where it had been tucked behind her ear so it acts as a wall between us while she makes coffee.

"Maybe a little," I say, trying not to make her feel bad even though I'm fairly sure I already had, which hadn't been my intention.

"Sorry, not sorry. Your brother's got skills," she says as she adds an ice cube to her coffee mug, grinning down at it like a fool.

"Don't be. Your moans will keep my imagination fueled for years," I reply, pausing for a moment before adding, "That sounded creepier than I meant it to."

"Anything I can do to help." She turns to me and winks as she sips on her coffee.

I'm dead. This woman is going to be the death of me. "Are you and Crax going to work on the store some more today?" I ask, trying to change the subject so neither of us feels that awkward anymore.

"I don't know." She pauses and frowns, worrying at her bottom lip as though debating something. When the ocean-blue pools of her eyes look up at me again I know she's made a decision. "I tried to break into the vault last night. I wanted to see what Smith's deal had been. He caught me and ended up helping me, but Hyde showed up plastered and vomited into the trash can. We helped him to bed but then Crax got... a little weird. I honestly don't know if I should tell you this, but I'd want to know if it was me." She pauses again and I want to shake her to get the rest out, but I don't. I wait. Patiently. For the most part. "He threw out all of Rumple's stuff. It's in the dumpster out back. His room or office or whatever it was is now completely empty and, uh, clean." She watches me when she finishes speaking and I know that she's expecting some big reaction from me, but she won't get it.

"Cool," I say as I pour the first batch of pancake batter into the pan, listening to it sizzle against the heat.

"I thought you might want something to remember him by. I didn't want you to miss your chance to get something before the garbage men came and picked it up," she adds, like I don't understand why she's telling me.

I flip the pancake and turn to look at her after judging how done the first side is. "The only thing I want to remember my father by is my brothers. Everything else is just crap. Crap he loved to collect, but still crap. If I had my way, we'd sell all the shit downstairs that we could and start something else, break from all of this deal-making bullshit. In fact, if this place wasn't paid in full, I'd say fuck it and tell them we should sell and start up somewhere else, somewhere fresh, without memories of beatings and broken hearts." I start out calm, but by the time I finish I sound bitter and angry.

Alexis walks over to me and places a hand on my cheek, before staring me dead in the eyes and asking, "Do your brothers know how much pain is inside you?"

I shake my head, making her hand brush against my cheek. "They both have enough to deal with from Rumple's aftermath, they don't need my pity party on top of it. I knew Crax was the heir to the throne and I envied it, even disliked him a bit for it before everything happened. Then he left, and my heart broke, before it shattered when Rumple started beating on Hyde, because I knew that some of those beatings were meant for me, but Hyde was protecting me. I had it the easiest out of the three of us. I know what my brothers went through but I couldn't do anything to stop it. I was too scared, too cowardly, and now all I'm left with is this resonating pain and impotent rage."

She watches me for a long time, long enough that the pancake starts to burn because I don't want to break eye contact. Finally, she says, "You should tell them. Honesty is the best policy in my book. It

might change your relationship with them, but it could bring you closer as well."

Something shifts inside me and a thread for a deal I thought was over shimmers back to life. It's strange, and I don't really know how to react, but a moment later Crax comes thundering down the stairs into the kitchen in nothing but his boxers. He looks at me, his gold eyes blazing. "Did you feel that?"

I nod.

Hyde comes stumbling down before Crax can reply and he turns to my other older brother and asks him the same. The asshole nods and pushes past Crax and me and even Alexis before grabbing the pot of coffee and drinking straight from it. When he's done, he turns and looks at us before grabbing a slice of bacon, shoving the whole thing into his mouth and saying, while chewing, "We goin' huntin'?"

"Guys, what just happened?" Alexis asks, looking between the three of us.

Before I can answer Crax ominously says, "A debt came due." He stomps off upstairs, looking more perturbed than usual, with Hyde following hot on his heels after grabbing a handful of bacon.

"I guess breakfast will have to wait," I mutter as I grab the cling wrap from the drawer and seal up the batter, putting it in the fridge. "Pancakes for dinner are just as good. Maybe I'll even let you have some of my special syrup." I look at Alexis and give her a wink.

Her hand on my arm stops me. "Zard," she says quietly but with such intensity that I spin on the spot. "I just want you to know that just because I slept with Crax last night doesn't mean I choose him, doesn't mean I've rejected you. In fact, I don't think I could ever choose between you. I just... I needed you to know that." Her blue eyes look up at me for a minute and I would swear I could have lived forever in that moment and been happy. Just as quickly as the thought enters my head she's gone, brushing past me and up the stairs to get ready for what is about to go down.

21

Alexis

The guys are being weird. I'm not sure what they mean by a debt coming due, but it doesn't sound good. I walk up the stairs after leaving that little nugget of knowledge with Zard and see Crax heading into the shower. Just the thought of what we did in there the night before makes my skin heat and my core turn molten. I jog up the hallway and catch him at the door.

"Want some company?" I ask in my best seductive voice.

Crax turns around and his face is a mix of emotions, enough that it makes me unsure about everything that happened. I knew things wouldn't change and yet, I didn't expect him to shut me out so completely only hours after he was inside me. "I need to be focused for what is about to happen and you're a distraction, Alexis."

He shuts the door in my face and my heart crumples a little. When I turn, I see Hyde leaning in his doorway sipping on some water. Fantastic. Nothing like having someone witness my humiliation.

"Doin' okay there, Princess? Did your knight slip off his charger?" Hyde asks before taking another long gulp.

"Crax is no knight, believe me," I say, thinking back to some of the things he'd done to me the night before.

"Oh, we all know, and we know how much you liked it." Hyde's face is smug when I feel the blush rise in my cheeks.

He was supposed to have been passed out drunk. He shouldn't have heard a damn thing. I want to groan but instead I lift my chin and look him in the eye. "Do you have something against a woman finding pleasure? Or is it just unusual for you to hear it?"

"Princess, whatever orgasms Crax gave you would be child's play in comparison to the ones I gave you. In fact, I don't think you could handle me in bed." He grins at me but there's a darkness at the edges, one that draws me to him like a mosquito to blood.

"You think I couldn't handle you in bed? Please! One look at me naked and you'd be making a mess in your shorts," I scoff, enjoying our back and forth for once. I know Hyde is a complicated man, how could he not be after years of abuse? I just didn't expect to find that complicated nature so damn alluring. Could I really care for all three of them? Or was I just sex-starved and now Crax had undammed the river of my need, so to speak?

"You are sexy, that's definitely true, but that mouth... I think I'd need to find a way to keep you quiet. A ball gag might do nicely, then maybe a good spanking to keep you in line before I fuck you." His pupils dilated. It was hard to tell since he had the darkest eyes out of the brothers, but they were

still a chocolatey brown whereas now they looked mostly black as he stared down at me.

My body feels like it's buzzing with electricity at his words. I wasn't into that kind of stuff, was I? I've never really had the chance to explore before since I never knew any of the guys I slept with well enough to trust them like that. Could I trust Hyde in bed? That was a dangerous question to ask.

"Lost your tongue, Princess?" Hyde asks, moving closer to me as he does so, which basically means that he's all up in my personal space since we were only standing the width of the door apart to begin with.

"Hyde," I begin, unsure what to say in response. He seems different this morning than he had the last few days. Maybe apologizing to Crax really did lift something in him. While my mind is spinning and my mouth gaping as I search for the words, his hand comes up and wraps in the bulk of my hair, grasping it firmly and pulling so my head tilts back. It sends a jolt of electricity to my core, making me gasp.

His lips crush mine when they descend and my breath is stolen by the ferocity of his kiss. I thought Hyde hated me or at the very least disliked me, but his kiss told me a different story. His kiss was scorching my very soul as he claimed my mouth like a man starved.

A small moan escapes my mouth as his tongue invades and controls my own. When he growls low in his throat in response, it rumbles through my chest. I arch into him, feeling every bit the wanton hussy my mother would accuse me of being and not regretting a second of it.

Hyde's hand that isn't in my hair cups my ass, sliding down until he pulls one leg off the ground and I let him as he wraps it around his hip. The t-shirt I'd grabbed off the dresser earlier this morning rides up, exposing me to the air around us. His hand rubs back along my thigh and slides under the t-shirt.

He groans when he realizes I'm not wearing any panties and rolls his hips against me, making me break our kiss so I can gulp in lungfuls of air. Hyde snarls and claims my lips once more, pushing against me more insistently, and the bulge in his pants makes me more than a little curious. The hand that's in my hair holding my head in place releases and goes to my other leg, lifting so that I am completely supported against the wall by the way he is pinning me to it.

The feel of his hands on my skin is more than a little arousing. Unlike Crax's hands, Hyde's are rough with calluses and scars covering them. He massages my ass as he rocks against me, each roll of his hips punishing yet exhilarating as my pleasure increases. His hands shift closer to my core and I feel his fingers against my folds. I moan in encouragement.

One finger presses between my folds, my silkiness coating it immediately, which only makes him groan in response. He pulls away to mutter, "So wet. Is it all for me, Princess?"

His deep brown eyes stare down at me and I pant, "Of course it is, Hyde."

"Say my name again," he growls.

"Hyde," I breathe a second before his lips crush against mine and the finger that had been toying with me slips all the way in, making my hips buck. Then he's fucking me with the one finger, adding a second a moment later.

"So fucking tight," he whispers against my lips.

"Make me come, Hyde," I moan back, as his fingers never stop moving. I need the release after being so worked up, and I want Hyde to be the one to give it to me.

"You come when I say you can come," he growls back. "And if you don't then you won't get fucked when we get back."

God, the thought of him fucking me almost sends me over the edge already and I don't know why. Maybe because he's so rough, so distant that I feel like he'd make what Crax did last night look gentle

and caring. Maybe because he makes me want to rile him up all the damn time but right now, with his fingers in my pussy and his tongue in my mouth, I'd do just about anything he asked.

He eases his thumb between us and flicks it over my clit between the roll of his hips. The position has to be uncomfortable for him but he doesn't seem to care. After a moment, he breaks the kiss and dips his head to my chest, taking one of my nipples into his mouth through the t-shirt. The hot wetness and the rough rub of the cotton pushes me higher.

"Hyde, please, please, I need to..." I moan and my words cut off as he switches to the other nipple.

The sensation stops and I panic. He's not going to leave me on the edge like this, surely?

"When you come, it's going to be quiet. You're going to keep it between us. When I fuck you, you can scream to the rooftops, but right now, I want your sounds for myself, not the prying ears of my brothers. Do you understand?" he asks as his thumb circles my bundle of nerves again and again.

I can barely keep myself in check but I manage to nod.

"Good girl. You can come," he whispers into my ear, nipping on the lobe. That jolt of pain launches me into the stratosphere of pleasure. My pussy clenches around his fingers but he doesn't stop, just keeps fucking me with them, extending my release. I manage to keep my noises to an initial grunt followed by a quiet keening sound as the waves wash over me.

I slowly come back to myself and Hyde withdraws his fingers, setting me down on the ground once more, before lifting his fingers to his mouth and sucking them clean. It causes another flush of desire to go through me, which I'm sure Hyde notices with those dark eyes of his that see too much.

"You owe me a good fucking when we get back," I say, my voice husky with my desire and the effort from keeping myself quiet.

"As you wish," he says as he backs away, tucking his erection up into the waistband of his pants. I can't help but watch, getting a glimpse of the swollen head of his cock, and realizing that my wetness was spread all over the front of his pants where he'd been moving against me.

"You might want to change," I say before turning away from him, fighting the urge to strip him naked and ride him right there in the hallway.

As I move away I see Zard watching me, his eyes hooded and his face flushed. He's shirtless and tucking himself back into his pants. Had he just jerked off to Hyde and I in the hallway? Why did I find that such a turn on? When had I become so horny all the damn time?

I duck into my room as Zard does the same, both of us seeming to feel awkward about the situation. Quickly I change into something I can wear in public, panties and all. I snag the bathroom while it's free and perform my normal morning rituals before heading downstairs.

The three of them are waiting on me, and when I enter the room heat fills all three sets of eyes. My body feels like it's on fire under their attention. The longer I look, though, the more I see that at least Crax's and Zard's gazes are tinged with sadness. I knew Zard was aware of my hallway activities with Hyde, but had he told Crax? If Crax wanted me to be exclusive he should have invited me in to the shower and not treated me like day old takeout.

"Ready?" I ask, not trusting my voice to say more.

They all nod and we go down to the car. Hyde slips into the driver's seat with Crax next to him, while Zard and I are in the back. As we start weaving through the city I realize that Crax is following some kind of inner awareness as he calls out directions to Hyde.

At first everything seems fine, weird, but fine, and I'm not worried at all. As we head further into the downtown area and pass through it only to come out on the side where I was with Crax the day before, I start to panic. The area we are in is where Smith lives. It couldn't be to do with him could

it? They think he’s dead, and I certainly haven’t indicated otherwise, so what the hell was going on?

22

Crax

SMITH SHOULD BE DEAD. This isn't possible. This isn't… is it?

My hands are white as they clench the steering wheel. The debt that had awakened between us *felt* like Smith. It was like a familiar scent, or a distant memory one couldn't quite recall. When I closed my eyes, I could sense the person who had made the deal with my father. I could feel the burden of the debt weighing so heavily on me I honestly wondered if I could bear the weight.

It was staggering. A debt that should've been paid long ago.

But more than that, the second the debt had awakened once more, the guilt of what we might have to do had weighed so heavily on me that I couldn't touch Alexis. I could barely look at her. If I hurt her friend like this, would she ever forgive me? Would she hate that I'd touched her and then hate me even more when she still couldn't escape me?

"We getting out?" Zard asks, and there's tension in his voice.

Do Zard and Hyde feel Smith in this deal as much as I do? Or is the feeling more powerful for Rumple's first born son? I don't know, but I do know we need to face this. We need to see who this is and hope like hell that something's wrong, and it isn't Smith. After all, when has a debt suddenly reappeared after the person has died?

It didn't make any sense.

I take a deep, steadying breath, willing myself to ignore the weird inkling that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It might feel like Smith, but that isn't possible. And once I proved it, I could apologize to Alexis for pushing her away this morning. I'd make things better between us, and I'd keep working to make Sterling City the place all of us could make a home.

"Yeah," I say, and I know it's been a painfully long time since Zard asked. "Let's go."

We get out, and I can't even bear to look at Alexis. I feel the pull, and I follow it like a puppet on a string. I climb the stairs, leaving Alexis to follow with my brothers. Behind me, I hear Hyde make a joke, and I hope like hell that my brothers don't feel Smith the way I do, or else Hyde's light attitude makes him an even bigger asshole than he likes to pretend to be.

I push open a door, revealing a depressing hallway with a sour smell that seems to come from the very walls. Which isn't right. None of this is right. Smith is the child of a wealthy family in this town. He wouldn't be caught dead in a place like this, literally or figuratively. Which makes it even easier

to convince myself that this weird feeling is wrong. That something is wrong with our powers.

Stopping outside a door, I lift my hand.

"Wait."

I freeze, but don't look at Alexis as I speak. "Our job is to collect debts. We made a deal, so this is what we do now, whether you want to or not."

My words come out harsher than I intended them to, but I try not to focus on it. Right now, I need to see who's on the other side of this door. I need to know that a dead man hasn't come to ruin things just as they were starting to get better.

I move to knock, but something makes me stop. The sounds of voices on the other side of the door. And something about one of the voices makes a chill run down my spine. I know that voice, even though I hope like hell I'm wrong. I pause and listen longer.

Hell. Fucking hell.

Dropping my hand, I take a step back.

"Lost your nerve?" Hyde asks, sarcastically.

"Take Alexis to the car."

"No," she says, defiance dripping from the word.

"Take her to the car," I say again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as Zard tries to grab her arm, but she shakes him off. "What are you going to do?" she demands.

Finally, I look at her, and my entire chest aches. Her hair is back in that ponytail of hers, and the fire is back in those deep blue eyes. She's covered herself in all the things she thinks will put a layer between her and the world. But even here, in this stained hall, she's still the goddess who I made love to all night long. She's still the woman who screamed my name when I buried myself deep inside her.

And I'll do anything to keep her safe.

"Pick her the fuck up and take her out," I say, my voice holding anger rather than the fear I feel.

She takes a step closer to me glaring. "Last night… it's never going to happen again, you got that, you asshole?"

I flinch, even though I expected her anger. "We own you. Remember? Now, don't make this harder than it has to be."

Zard and Hyde are looking at me like I've grown a second head, but I don't give a shit. My blood is starting to chill. If I don't face what's on the other side of the door soon… I don't even want to think about it.

"In fact, all of you go wait for me downstairs. Now."

Zard knows something's wrong. I see it in his eyes. And I know he trusts me when he picks her up and throws her over his shoulder. She screams and begins to struggle, but Zard doesn't slow. He might be the softest of the three of us, but he's still a son of Stiltskin.

Hyde lifts a brow. I think he might argue. But then he turns and follows Zard down the stairs as Alexis screams.

When the sounds of her protests dies down, I turn back to the door. I take a deep breath, tense my muscles, and kick it in. The wood along the frame splinters, and the door hits the ground, completely ripping from the hinges. Three pairs of eyes are on me in an instant.

I see a small, very pregnant female with short red hair and glasses. A man stands behind her, one I recognize from his picture at his own funeral, but my gaze sweeps past them in an instant and falls on the man who lounges on a couch like he owns the room.

His skin is green. Different shades of green, blending from light to dark. His head is smooth and

shined to perfection, and his eyes are a sickly yellowish-green. He's not a huge man, more tall and toned, but his presence fills the room. Or maybe it just surrounds me, leaving me shaking with rage.

"Crax Stiltskin," he says, drawing out my name. "It's been a long time."

I feel sick. When I imagined seeing this man again, I pictured myself ripping his heart from his chest. Not having a friendly chat. "Not long enough."

"Is that anyway to greet your good friend, Naevok, the great necromancer himself?"

"You're *no* friend of mine," I hiss, my mind overwhelmed with my pure and utter hatred of this piece of shit.

The necromancer smiles, a slow, dangerous smile. "So, I guess we can skip the pleasantries and get down to business."

"I don't have business with you." I turn to face Smith. "*We* have business. Now, why don't you come with me?"

For a man who looks so nervous, and like he feels more comfortable playing a video game than going to the gym, I'm impressed by the way he draws himself up taller. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

But even though I admire him, in the same breath I want to curse him. Does he have any idea how dangerous the necromancer is? I feel like a mother trying to coach her child away from a cobra. If I'm not fast enough, this man's poison will claim another life.

"We can talk about your deal later. Right now, we need to go."

He shakes his head, and the way he fidgets from one foot to the other takes me off-guard. "No. No. We can't go with you. We did all this to stay away from you. We--"

"Shhh," the pregnant woman beside him says, and she hands him something. A little device that he takes and begins to play with. Then her gaze goes to me. "You need to go. Now."

Do they not get it? Do they not realize that I'm the good guy here?

The necromancer grins. "Yeah, Crax, why don't you go?"

Apparently, I can't play nice anymore. My jaw locks, and I take a step forward, knowing that I might not survive this battle. And knowing that it's worth the risk if I can finally kill one of the ghosts that haunts me.

"Crax!" I'm shocked when Alexis comes crashing back into the room. Hyde and Zard follow, Hyde wincing and holding his crotch, and Zard bleeding from the nose. "Don't you touch him!"

I stiffen, and my thoughts spin. "You… knew he was alive?"

Her eyes are defiant as they lock with mine. "Yes, and I'm not going to let you collect your debt. Do you understand me?"

She… lied to us? I couldn't believe it. My brain couldn't process that she'd do this, nor could it process that another woman I cared about was now in the necromancer's crosshairs.

"We had a deal," I say, a desperate note to my voice.

We had a deal that she'd help us collect our debts. I didn't want her here. But now that she was, maybe she could help us get out of this room without ending up dead. Or had she forgotten about everything that had happened between us?

She glares at me. "I'm breaking our deal. Do you understand me?"

A terrible familiar feeling claws at my stomach, and Alexis drops to her knees. Panic fills her expression, and she starts to gasp for air. The deals struck between our people were sacred. To break a deal would have a price.

"Take it back," I beg her, rubbing at the growing heaviness in my chest.

"I won't let you… hurt… him," she says, each word a struggle.

“Take it back!” I roar, feeling the magic closing around us both.

The magic would hurt me.

But the magic would kill her.

“Alexis.” Smith sounds panicked.

I kneel down beside her and grip her shoulder, shaking her even though she seems to have trouble focusing on me. “Trust me.”

After a second, she whispers, “I take it back.”

And then, the weight is gone. She gasps in deep breaths, and I’m shocked by the overwhelming desire that flows through me to pull her into my arms and take her far from here, debt or not. This woman, she’s mine. I want to protect her. But now, now she’d walked right into the lion’s den.

“Necromancer,” Hyde says behind me. “What hole did you crawl out of?”

Hyde knows the story. But Hyde wasn’t old enough to remember that day the way I did. If he did, there was nothing that could stop him from making a terrible decision right now.

The man chuckles low, but I can sense his irritation, and I want to curse Hyde. There are people in this city more powerful than we are. Not many, but the necromancer is one of them. It’s why I didn’t want Hyde here. He’d only make the situation worse. I cast him a look I hope tells him to shut up, but Hyde’s gaze is locked on the man.

“You boys always fascinated me. In all ways, we should be friends. We should work together. But you seem to be under the misconception that you’re better than me.” That smile of his takes on a dangerous edge. “Even you must understand that you’re wrong.”

“You’re a fucking cockroach,” Hyde growls.

I silently curse. “We’re not here for this.”

The necromancer’s anger begins to uncoil, filling the air with danger. “Careful, boy, or you might just find yourself crushed under my heel.”

“Like--”

“Stop,” I say, standing, and offering a hand to help Alexis up.

She refuses, standing on her own.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Hyde growls, taking a step toward me.

“Go to the car. I’ll handle this,” I say.

His hands curl into fists. “We’re not children. Don’t tell us you’ll handle it.”

I turn away from him. He’s like a goddamn bomb. I just need to end this before he goes off. “Smith, please, listen to reason. This deal… it was for your first born son. You have years before--”

“Weeks,” Smith interrupts.

My eyes widen, and my gaze goes to the red-head. She places a hand on her belly, and glares at me.

“Ev-even so,” I stutter over the words. “We can figure this out.”

“Or,” the necromancer draws out, “I could give you more money. A chance to earn back what you lost, with the added benefit of hiding you and your woman from your debt collectors once more.”

Smith’s eyes grow calculating.

I move subtly closer to him. “Listen to me, we can figure things out. We’re reasonable people. But… this man… it won’t end well, Smith. Do you understand me? If you owe him money, we can figure that out, we can--”

“I’m not making another deal with you,” he says. “Your deals require more than money.”

“I’m not my father,” I emphasize each word. “Trust me.”

Smith looks at Alexis. “Can I trust him?”

I look at her, and I'm surprised when she doesn't answer right away. "She's having your child?"

Smith nods.

"And the deal with Rumple is for your first born?"

He nods again.

"Then they have to collect, there's no way out of it."

I curse. Does Alexis trust me so little? "You don't understand--"

"We'll go with the necromancer," Smith says.

I shake my head. "Don't do this. You want to keep your woman and child safe? They won't be safe with him. I promise."

Smith looks at the necromancer. "We'll go with you."

The man rises.

"Don't touch him," I say.

The necromancer grins. "He made his choice, gnome. Accept it."

"He owes us a debt." I raise my voice with each word. "We're here to collect. They need to come with us."

The necromancer waves a hand.

I hear Hyde scream in rage and then he's diving at the man, all his fury surrounding him like the sun. He goes crashing into the couch, flipping it over and then hitting the wall. Where the necromancer stood is now empty. I look at Smith and his woman. The necromancer curls a hand around each of their shoulders. And I know, no matter how long I live, I'll never forget the look of pure evil that comes over his face.

And then, all of them are gone.

Hyde leaps from the ground and roars. He searches the place, tearing through the tiny bathroom and kitchen, then races down the hall. But I know his anger is pointless. Wherever they are now, they're long gone. And I'm sure we won't see Smith or his woman again until unidentified bodies are found floating in the river.

Alexis turns to me, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "You're never going to get them now."

I look at her. "And they're going to end up dead."

Her bravado falters. "No, Smith just had to play cards for him, and he'd keep them hidden from you."

"And you think that's where it'll end?" I say. I can barely look at her. "No one walks away from working with the necromancer. No one. Even people with all the power in the world."

For the first time, I let my emotions wash over me. I'd tried to keep my brothers and Alexis safe. I'd tried to get Smith and his woman away from the necromancer.

I'd… I'd tried to face the man who killed my mother without losing my shit. But now, now? I feel prickling behind my eyes. Another innocent was going to die because I didn't handle things correctly. Because I wasn't enough.

I spin around.

Alexis grabs my arm. "You don't know that. You don't know anything. You're just some asshole who thinks he's one of the good guys."

I shrug off her hand and walk out.

She's right. I want to be one of the good guys. I want that more than anything in this world. But I'm not. I'm one of the bad guys.

And their deaths will be on my head.

I fucking hate myself.

23

Alexis

I DON'T KNOW where the hell Hyde is. I don't know where the hell Crax is going. And I don't know if Smith going with the necromancer is really as bad as Crax is saying. So I look at Zard.

He's standing in the corner, looking as if he saw a ghost. His hands keep closing and unclosing, but he doesn't speak.

"Zard?" I was so damned angry, but his name comes out worried.

He finally looks at me. "Sorry, what did you say?"

I take a step closer to him. "Are you okay?"

He laughs, but it's a laugh filled with pain. "I just can't believe that's him. I always thought he was a nightmare, or a story Rumple told to keep us away from the darker side of Sterling City. But he's real. The necromancer is actually real."

"The necromancer?"

It takes him a long moment to respond. "Yeah. The necromancer. He's… he's a billionaire who runs The Croupier, that big casino uptown. Plus, he and his men run all the underground gambling rings. And every time someone turns up missing, you can usually trace them back to him."

A chill rolls down my spine. "Is he really that bad?"

He nods.

"Is that why Hyde flipped?"

The pain in his eyes takes my breath away. "No. It's… the necromancer is the one who killed our mother."

It feels like the earth shifts under my feet. "What?"

"Rumple angered him, so he killed her. Carved out her eyes and threw her in the lake, hands and feet tied. They said she was still alive when they threw her in."

"Oh my God, Zard--"

He shakes his head. "I was only a baby. Crax and Hyde remember her. They... it was hard for them. They hate the necromancer."

"And I told Smith to go with him."

Zard winces. "I'm so sorry, Alexis."

My heart races. "He could be okay, right? He'll let them go when--"

He shakes his head. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” My voice takes on a harsh edge. “I’m not going to let that happen to them. I’m going to get them back.”

He says nothing, just looks at me with pity.

I turn away from him and race down the stairs. When I reach the street outside, I’m breathing hard. I look both ways on the sidewalk and see Crax turn a corner into an alley. I race after him, but when I reach the front of the alley, I stop short.

Hyde’s hands are covered in blood. He’s beating the walls of the building, and his face is tortured. Crax lays a hand on his shoulder, and Hyde punches his brother hard in the face.

Crax stumbles back, then I hear him say, “It’s okay.”

Hyde punches him again.

Crax’s head snaps back, but then he’s looking at his brother again. “He’s gone. Everything’s okay.”

Hyde hits him again and again, and then he sags against his brother. Crax holds him tightly, and there’s so much emotion between them that something inside of me snaps, and I start to cry too. When a sob escapes my throat, both men look back at me.

It takes a minute for Hyde to push himself away from his brother.

Crax looks back at me. One eye is already swollen. A cut is bleeding on his cheek. But instead of telling me what a moron I am, instead of saying I should have trusted him, he just says, “I’m so sorry, Alexis.”

I run right to him, and he sweeps me into his arms. Suddenly, Crax and Hyde are holding me close.

Crax speaks, his throat thick. “Come here, Zard.”

A minute later, the youngest brother wraps us all in a hug.

I speak through my tears. “I messed up.”

“We all mess up,” Zard whispers.

“You don’t understand,” I tell them, and I know the words are true as I speak them aloud. “Smith is my family, and I don’t care how dangerous this guy is, I’m going to get him back.”

“Alexis.” Crax draws back from me and opens his mouth to say more, but I cut him off.

“I know I have a debt to you, but I have to do this or I’ll never be able to forgive myself.”

His gaze locks with mine. “Do you really need to do this?”

“Yes.”

His eyes close tightly for one painful moment, and then they flash open. “Okay. Then we’ll help you.”

My heart races. “You will?”

“This place...” He pauses, and looks at his brothers. “I want it to be my home. But it’s only going to be a home with all of you with me.” His gaze sweeps back to me. “So, if this is what you need to do, I’m going to help you do it.”

“Me too,” Zard says slowly.

We look to Hyde. He huffs, “I’ll help too, but you still owe me a fucking.”

“As long as we’re requesting things--” Zard begins.

I laugh, and Crax brushes away my tears. “I can’t believe this.”

“It’s a damn fairy tale,” Hyde says. “Twisted deals, necromancers, and foursomes.”

My cheeks heat. “Who said anything about a foursome?”

Hyde winks at me.

I draw back from them, feeling flustered. “You know you guys are kind of nuts, right?”

Zard grins. “You better be thankful for that, because no one else would be crazy enough to go necromancer hunting with you.”

I shake my head, and we start back toward the car. I’m surprised when Crax hesitantly takes my hand. A lot has happened tonight. A lot needs to be figured out. But for today, at least we’re together.

It’s not a happily ever after, life is too messy for that, but it is a happily for now.

Until we kill a fucking necromancer. Maybe once that’s done we’ll get our true happily ever after.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lacey Carter Andersen loves reading, writing, and drinking excessive amounts of coffee. She spends her days taking care of her husband, three kids, and three cats. But at night, everything changes! Her imagination runs wild with strong-willed characters, unique worlds, and exciting plots that she enthusiastically puts into stories.

Lacey has dozens of tales: science fiction romances, paranormal romances, short romances, reverse harem romances, and more. So, please feel free to dive into any of her worlds; she loves to have the company!

And you're welcome to reach out to her; she really enjoys hearing from her readers.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen Scott lives in the Chicago area with her wonderful husband and furry, four-legged kids. She spends way too much time with her nose in a book and isn't sorry about it. When not reading or writing, Helen can be found absorbed in one video game or another or crafting her heart out.

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